Title

Distrust in corporate communications: does it matter?
Abstract

Purpose
This study provides much needed empirical data to conceptualise organisational distrust in communications’ scholarship. A limited understanding of distrust has implications for corporate communication scholars and practitioners as, ultimately, efforts to rebuild trust and reduce distrust in organisations and corporations may be hindered if we do not truly understand the complexity and nature of the concepts we are trying to repair.

Methodology
A repeated single-criterion card-sort method was utilised in this study to allow the sample of 40 respondents to identify the terms they associate with organisational trust and distrust.

Findings
From the current study’s findings, it is proposed that there is support for organisational distrust to be considered and studied as a separate and distinct concept to organisational trust within the corporate communications and public relations literature. The current study’s findings do not neatly reflect all the items included in existing scales for organisational distrust and accordingly this suggests that further research into distrust as a concept is warranted.

Value
This study contributes to the literature by presenting a proposed conceptualisation of organisational distrust and providing further evidence for organisational distrust and organisational trust to be studied as related but separate concepts. Developing a more comprehensive conceptualisation of organisational trust and distrust is important for both communication scholars and practitioners as it allows for a more accurate understanding of relationship quality between stakeholders and organisations.

Keywords
Distrust, Trust, Organisation-Public Relationship (OPR), Mistrust, Relationship Quality, Card-Sort

Article Classification
Research Paper
Introduction

Within the corporate communications literature, organisational trust has been widely accepted as an essential ingredient of any long-term relationship (Xu, 2019; Chandler, 2014; Hon and Grunig, 1999). Yet, when trust is reduced, suspended, or lost, we have comparatively little academic insight. Organisational distrust is alluded to as a negative outcome of corporate issues and crises (Kim and Ferguson, 2019; Kim, Krishna and Plowman, 2018; Straub, 2017; Olkkonen, 2016), however, it is rarely, if ever, defined or conceptualised as its own construct. A limited understanding of distrust has implications for corporate communication scholars and practitioners. Ultimately, efforts to rebuild trust and reduce distrust in organisations and corporations may be hindered if we do not truly understand the complexity and nature of the concepts we are trying to repair.

The limited exploration of organisational distrust within the corporate communications literature may be partially explained by the cross-disciplinary treatment and translation of trust. The existing communications literature draws heavily on management (Mayer et al., 1995), and marketing models (Moorman et al., 1993), which are often geared towards treating trust as a behavioural outcome or intention (eg. risk-taking behaviour or purchasing behaviour). Under this lens, the existence of organisational distrust is presumed to lead to the same behavioural outcome as a lack of trust (Lewicki et al., 1998). As such within these models (Mayer et al., 1995; Moorman et al., 1993), distrust is identified simply as the opposite of trust and no value is attributed to studying it as its own distinct concept (Schoorman et al., 2007). In this paper we argue that this perspective does not properly suit corporate communications, with the view that organisational trust and distrust operate as perceptions, not behaviours, that indicate relationship quality (Hon and Grunig, 1999).

Recently, some corporate communications and public relations scholars have moved away from the unidimensional conceptualisation of organisational trust as the opposite of organisational distrust (Kang and Park, 2017; Shen, 2017; Yang et al., 2015; Moon and Rhee, 2013). However, while these studies have progressed some of the arguments to treat organisational distrust as a separate and distinct concept to organisational trust, gaps still remain in how distrust is conceptualised. This study provides much needed empirical data to conceptualise organisational distrust in communications scholarship by presenting the findings of an exploratory card-sort study. This study contributes to the literature by presenting a proposed conceptualisation of organisational distrust and providing further evidence for organisational distrust and organisational trust to be studied as related but separate concepts. The following section identifies and discusses some of the key literature that has progressed the conversation on distrust across disciplines.
Literature Review

The cross-disciplinary history of trust

In order to understand why organisational distrust has remained an underexplored concept in the communications literature, it is crucial to first present current understandings of organisational trust. Since the introduction of trust as a construct of interest in the behavioural sciences (Deutsch, 1958), researchers have continued to establish its pivotal role in relationships with, within and between organisations (Straub, 2017; Ingenhoff and Sommer, 2010; Tomlinson and Mayer, 2009; Rousseau et al., 1998; Kramer and Tyler, 1996; Mayer et al., 1995). Due to the cross-disciplinary approach to trust, there have also been extensive attempts to define organisational trust through different disciplinary lenses and in various theoretical and specific, problem-oriented contexts.

Of prominence, in the management literature Mayer et al. (1995) proposed a model of organisational trust as it relates to risk-taking in a relationship. Mayer et al. (1995, 712) defined 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”. In doing so, Mayer et al. (1995) proposed that perceived trustworthiness is dependent on three key elements of ability, benevolence, and integrity. Comparatively within the marketing literature, Moorman et al. (1993, 82) summarise that trust is viewed as a “belief, confidence or expectation about an exchange partner's trustworthiness that results from the partner's expertise, reliability, or intentionality”. Within their empirical paper that explored trust in the context of market research relationships, the scholars offered a concise definition of trust as “a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence” (Moorman et al., 1993, 82). These definitions are indicative of management and marketing studies that treat trust as a behavioural intention and that is ultimately why trust is a concept of interest within these fields. Despite the different disciplinary lens, management and marketing definitions of trust are also featured heavily throughout the communication and public relations literature (Lorenzo-Dus and Cristofaro, 2018; Fuoli et al., 2017; Kodish, 2017; van der Merwe and Puth, 2014; Farrelly et al., 2003; Togna, 2003).

This perspective that trust is a behavioural intention has also been a significant discussion point in a number of systematic literature reviews that have deciphered and categorised the varying definitions of trust within the literature. Of note, management scholars Rousseau et al. (1998, 394) argued that regardless of the underlying discipline, trust was based on “confident expectations and a willingness to be vulnerable”. Aligning to this view, marketing scholar Bozic (2017, 539) suggested in
his review of consumer trust studies that the majority of researchers agree on one or both of the following central elements of trust: “(1) behavioural intention (or willingness) or behaviour and (2) expectation (or confidence, belief)”. To this day whether scholars identify or assume that trust is a behavioural intention or perception remains one of the most contentious points across disciplines, and also shapes whether or not scholars see value in studying distrust as a separate and distinct concept.

It is important to be clear on the definitional approach taken as this significantly impacts the subsequent operationalisation of concepts. In their study that sought to refine the existing conceptualisation and operationalisation of organisation–public relationship (OPR) quality originally proposed by Hon and Grunig (1999), Shen (2017) strongly argued that trust should be defined and studied as a perception, and not as a behavioural intention. Quoting work by marketing scholars Morgan and Hunt (1994), Shen (2017) states that “just as behavioural intention is best viewed as an outcome of attitude and not as part of its definition (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975), “willingness to rely” should be viewed as an outcome (or, alternatively, a potential indicator) of trust and not as part of “how one defines it” (Morgan and Hunt, 1994, 23). Accordingly, Shen (2017) suggests that behavioural intention does not accurately represent organisation-public relationship quality, of which trust is a key measure (Hon and Grunig, 1999), as relationship quality is at its core an overall concept of perceptions. The current study aligns with Shen (2017) and Morgan and Hunt (1994), and conceptualises organisational trust and distrust as perceptions.

If, and how, organisational distrust is related to trust

The debate around trust and its treatment in the literature transfers to distrust. Commonly, distrust has been conceptualised as being the opposite end of a trust continuum (Barber, 1983; Lewis and Weigert, 1985). In this way, distrust has been treated as the absence of trust (Adams et al., 2010; Lewicki and Bunker, 1996; Rotter, 1980). This view is summarised by Lumineau (2014, 4) who stated that in historic models “trust and distrust are considered perfect substitutes and are mutually exclusive”. As such from this perspective, increasing trust is all that is needed to avoid the possibility of distrust (Rotter, 1980).

However, the trust/distrust continuum is no longer universally accepted as scholars have raised concerns over the simplicity of this definition (Kang and Park, 2017; Lewicki et al., 1998). Within the management literature, Lewicki et al.’s (1998) conceptual article was one of the first pieces to put forward an alternative viewpoint on the relationship between organisational trust and distrust. Lewicki et al. (1998, 439) proposed their own conceptualisation where trust and distrust were not opposite ends of single continuum, defining “trust in terms of confident expectations
regarding another’s conduct, and distrust in terms of confident negative expectations regarding another’s conduct”. When reflecting on the various definitions of trust and distrust that had emerged in the literature, Lewicki et al. (1998) identified that researchers had started to move the focus of trust studies strongly towards behaviours or the outcomes of trust. Lewicki et al. (1998) critiqued that in trust research studies such as Mayer et al. (1995) both trust and distrust are understood as behavioural terms or intentions, and as a result a lack of trust and the presence of distrust are predicted to result in the same outcome of risk-taking avoidance. Lewicki et al. (1998, 439) argued that this approach is quite limited and gives little attention to “confidences, intentions, and motives that promote trusting / distrusting and trustworthy / untrustworthy behaviour”.

Connecting to the discussion in the previous section of this paper, the Mayer et al. (1995) definition does not position trust and distrust as perceptions. Accordingly Lewicki et al. (1998) suggested the Mayer et al. (1995) model presented a narrow way to view distrust. While widely cited, the Lewicki et al. (1998) model has, however, received strong critique from management scholars, particularly the authors of the Mayer et al. (1995) paper. Schoorman et al. (2007, 350) specifically oppose Lewicki et al.’s (1998) high trust and high distrust conditions, suggesting that if you trust a partner you do not need to verify and doing so “would be the clearest indication that you do not trust”. Schoorman et al. (2007) go on to defend the Mayer et al. (1995) model by stating that the antecedent of ability requires the relationship of trust to be domain specific, which “allows for the multifaceted and multiplex relationships about which Lewicki et al. (1998, 350) raised concerns”. Again, Schoorman et al.’s (2007) key argument comes back to the view that trust will lead to risk-taking in a relationship and as such is viewed as a behavioural intention. The authors concisely state that they “felt that the complete lack of trust and distrust are the same thing” (Schoorman et al., 2007, 350), as ultimately a lack of trust and the existence of distrust would lead to the same behavioural intention.

This logic does not neatly transfer into the communication and public relations literature, where the difference between low trust and distrust is important. As communication professionals and scholars identify trust as a key measure of relationship quality (Hon and Grunig, 1999) and accordingly use these measures to design strategies to rebuild and repair relationships, understanding the full complexity of trust and distrust, as distinct constructs, is necessary for effective strategic communication programs. Despite this divergence between disciplines, the Mayer et al. (1995) model is still frequently cited within communication studies when defining and conceptualising the concept of trust (Lorenzo-Dus and Cristofaro, 2018; Fuoli et al., 2017; Kodish, 2017; van der Merwe and Puth, 2014; Poppo and Schepker, 2010; Qian and Daniels, 2008) and scales used to measure organisational trust are often also based on this same model. In the current study
organisational trust and distrust are viewed as indicators of relationship quality and as such this research seeks to explore Lewicki et al.’s (1998) position that distrust is a separate and distinct construct to trust further. We believe by creating a better understanding of distrust as its own concept we can make a significant contribution to the corporate communications literature that can be applied to future studies.

**Emerging studies on distrust within the communication literature**

Aside from a few prominent papers (Kang and Park, 2017; Shen, 2017; Yang et al., 2015; Moon and Rhee, 2013; Adams et al., 2010), study into distrust in the communication literature has been limited. As Moon and Rhee (2013) purport, although several studies have focussed on the decline and deterioration of relationships in the marketing literature, communications and public relations have been slow to look at these issues. This has gradually begun to shift as communication scholars have realised the need to identify negative relational components to allow effective restoration of damaged relationships between organisations and publics (Moon and Rhee, 2013).

Focussing specifically on conceptualising distrust, Shen (2017) and Kang and Park (2017) have made recent contributions. In Shen’s (2017) paper, distrust was proposed as a fourth dimension of organisation-public relationship quality and tested within two sample settings: university–student relationships and organisation–employee relationships. The authors sought to extend the conceptualisation of relational distrust to public relations by revising Lewicki et al.’s (1998) definition and defining distrust as “both parties’ or partners’ fear of and perception of sinister intentions of other parties’ or partners’ conduct” (Shen, 2017, 998). Comparatively, the Kang and Park (2017, 115) study aimed to review “trust and distrust as conceptually distinct constructs that warrant in-depth conceptual and empirical examinations for situations in which these two concepts can simultaneously exist”. Similarly to Shen (2017), Kang and Park (2017, 998) define distrust as “a belief in the sinister intentions of another party based on the party’s past conduct”. It is important to note that recent communications papers namely by Shen (2017), Kang and Park (2017) and Moon and Rhee (2013) do follow Lewicki et al.’s (1998)’s lead in defining organisational distrust in reciprocal terms to trust. Where these papers differ from Lewicki et al. (1998) however is in their conceptualisations of what factors contribute to organisational distrust.

While these recent papers (Kang and Park, 2017; Shen, 2017; Yang et al., 2015; Moon and Rhee, 2013) all strongly agree with the arguments of Lewicki et al. (1998), their attempts to progress the exploration of the concept of distrust have all focussed on developing scales and measurements (see Table 1) at the expense of further and much-needed qualitative exploration of the concept. As a result, a number of these papers have based their scale development and items to measure distrust
on previous papers that do not reflect the premise of Lewicki et al.’s (1998) framework. For example, Kang and Park (2017), Yang et al., (2015) and Moon and Rhee (2013) all base their measures on Adams et al.’s (2010) scale for measuring corporate distrust. However, Adams et al. (2010, 38) define distrust as “the negative aspect of trust”, and not as a distinct and separate construct. Accordingly, while the Adams et al. (2010) paper contributes to our understanding of distrust mechanisms, it should not be relied upon as an effective measurement tool for distrust as a separate and distinct construct.

A similar issue around the conceptualisation and measurement proposed for organisational distrust is also apparent in the Shen (2017) paper. Shen’s (2017) proposed measurements for distrust are based on marketing scholar Cho’s (2006) study who tested the constructs of trust and distrust in the context of business to consumer exchanges over the Internet. While Cho (2006) does cite Lewicki et al. (1998) and includes separate measures for trust and distrust, the author suggests that two antecedents, competence and benevolence, are relevant to both trust and distrust. Cho (2006) states that like trust-building, distrust is based on the judgments of the other’s ability and motives and therefore “distrust is engendered when expectations of a partner’s competence and benevolence are violated” (Cho, 2006, 27). This however appears to be in direct violation with Lewicki et al. (1998, 440) who proposed that “there are elements that contribute to the growth and decline of trust, and there are elements that contribute to the growth and decline of distrust”, which are not necessarily the same. As such, following Cho’s (2006) scale items to measure organisational distrust as its own concept also comes with some limitations.

Table 1.

Summary of definitions and scale items from communication studies into distrust

| Reference | Definitions of Distrust | Scale Items to measure Distrust |
|-----------|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Shen (2017) | “both parties’ or partners’ fear of and perception of sinister intentions of other parties’ or partners’ conduct” (Shen, 2017, 998). | • I am sceptical about whether the university/organization will keep the students’/employees’ interest in mind when it makes decisions. |
|           |                         | • I feel that this university/organization will exploit students’/employees’ vulnerability given the chance. |
|           |                         | • I feel that this university/organization will engage in damaging and harmful behaviour |
| Source | Definition | Examples |
|--------|------------|----------|
| Kang and Park (2017) | “distrust as a belief in the sinister intentions of another party based on the party’s past conduct” (Kang and Park, 2017, 117). | - I feel that the way this university/organization is run is irresponsible and unreliable. - People who run the company will lie if doing so will increase its profit - The company takes a lot more than it gives - The company intentionally deceives the public - The company does not respect the law - The company does not accept accountability for its actions - The company does not care about acting ethically |
| Yang et al. (2015) | “organization–public distrust is defined as discredibility (i.e., concerns about an organization’s violation of obligations and reckless behaviour) and malevolence (i.e., concerns an organization’s intended harm and lack of commitment to public welfare)” (Yang et al., 2015, 181). | - This organisation... - Is not respectful of laws - Does not accept accountability for its actions - Does not care about acting ethically - People who run the company will lie to increase its profit - Takes a lot more than it gives - Intentionally deceives publics - Exploits its employees |
| Moon and Rhee (2013) | “one party’s level of suspicion and fear about the other party’s conduct and the willingness to close oneself off from the other party” (Moon and Rhee, 2013, 695). | - This corporation often deceives publics intentionally - This corporation seems to hide its problems - This company has the tendency to blame consumers or the environment when the problem or fault is its own - This corporation does not seem to practice transparent management |
While the studies identified in Table 1 have each made important contributions to the growing body of literature around organisational distrust, the above discussion highlights some gaps and concerns with how the concept of distrust has moved from definition to conceptualisation and measurement. There is evident work that has contributed to the argument for distrust to be considered a separate and distinct concept, however this has perhaps moved too quickly to survey scale development and measurement, rather than exploring organisational distrust more conceptually or qualitatively first. The key issue with this approach is that scholars appear to be making pre-posed judgements on what factors contribute to distrust without proper empirical data to support these assumptions. In summary, while learnings will be taken from the emerging studies into distrust within the communications and public relations literature, there is still sufficient space to further investigate distrust, which leads to the following research question:

How are organisational trust and distrust conceptualised and are they distinct from one another?

Answering this question will provide opportunity to uncover previously unexplored elements of distrust and further our understanding of organisational distrust as a potentially distinct concept within the corporate communications literature.

Methodology

Card-sort Methodology Background

The project was reviewed and approved by the university’s Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number 1900000176). Following Saunders et al.‘s (2014) examination of trust and distrust, a card-sort methodology was adopted to explore the complex nature of the concepts. At a rudimentary level, sorting techniques assume that people make sense of the world by categorising it, and that people can describe their own categorisation of the world with reasonable validity and reliability (Saunders et al., 2014). As Rugg and McGeorge (2005, 95) describe, the basic idea behind the research methods developed from personal construct theory is “simply to ask respondents to sort things into groups”. One of the primary benefits of the method is its ability to elicit categorisations in a way that is simple to administer and easy for the participant to understand (Fincher and Tenenberg, 2005). A repeated single-criterion sort method was identified as the most effective way to enable respondents to identify the terms they associate with trust and distrust without priming the concepts of trust and distrust as opposite of each other. Following this method would therefore allow participants to choose words that are either directly opposite of each or not
in terms of trust and distrust. This in turn would allow for the research question to be answered effectively.

**Card-sort Protocol**

Through the literature review, the authors identified a wide-range of terms from both academic and industry sources that were utilised to conceptualise and measure trust and distrust. To ensure that participants had the opportunity to choose terms representative of a continuum, each term identified in the literature was matched with a directly opposite term. After an iterative process the research team curated a final list of 40 terms (see Appendix 1) and 40 cards to represent each of these terms were created. Each card was numbered in the left-hand corner for reporting purposes and a definition deliberately taken from Google’s dictionary function was printed on the back of each card.

In the card-sort interview, the 40 cards were laid out for the participant to review. Once conformable with all the terms, the participants were asked to think about an organisation they trust (or based on order, an organisation they distrust), followed by the question “what five words from the cards in front of you would you choose to describe that organisation”. After the participants had identified five terms by selecting these from the full set, they were then asked to organise the five cards from most to least important. Next, all cards were placed into their original place and the process was repeated for the second question about an organisation that the participants distrusted. The order of the two questions was alternated equally to avoid any potential ordering bias. This activity was part of a larger research process, the remainder of which is not relevant to the purpose of the current paper and is therefore not reported here.

Once participants had completed the card-sort activity, participants were then asked to think about the process they had just completed and whether there were any words they had wanted to use in the activity that were not included in the set of cards. Additional words that were identified and the number of participants who identified these words were: uncaring \( n = 2 \), sustainable \( n = 2 \), self-serving \( n = 2 \), understanding \( n = 1 \), humble \( n = 1 \), humility \( n = 1 \), charitable \( n = 1 \), collaborative \( n = 1 \), self-centred \( n = 1 \), fair \( n = 1 \), famous \( n = 1 \), evasive \( n = 1 \), selfish \( n = 1 \), condescending \( n = 1 \), fake \( n = 1 \) and egotistical \( n = 1 \). Despite some participants identifying one or two words that could have been included in the set they also expressed that the provided words reflected an appropriate spread to answer the questions. On average the entire card-sort interview process took approximately 12 to 15 minutes of participants’ time.
Card-sort Sample

The sample for this phase of research was kept broad as the research questions were open to gain a range of perspectives on the concepts. A convenience sample of 40 Australian adults aged 18 years and older were asked to participate in a card-sort interview. The final participant age ranges, mean age, and gender breakdown can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. 
Gender and Ages of Card-Sort Sample

| Gender | Number of Participants | Age Range | Mean Age |
|--------|------------------------|-----------|----------|
| All    | 40                     | 21 – 50   | 34.5     |
| Female | 22                     | 21 – 46   | 32.5     |
| Male   | 18                     | 25 – 50   | 36.5     |

Results

Card-sort Data Analysis

The data from each question and answer sheet were entered manually into a Microsoft Excel document. From each participant’s answer sheet the card numbers were utilised to capture frequency of terms used for each concept and weights were recorded on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 representing the least important and 5 representing the most important term identified by the participant.

Frequency and weights of terms

Aligning to the approach taken by Saunders et al. (2014) in their card-sort analysis, the researcher initially reviewed the most frequently used and highly weighted terms for both trust and distrust within the whole dataset (please see Table 3). The highest frequency a single term could be cited for each concept (i.e., organisational trust) was 40. The highest weighting a single term could receive for each concept (i.e. organisational trust) was 200 which would occur if each of the 40 participants identified the same term as the most important (40 X 5 = 200). Table 3 presents the full card-sort frequency and weights for each term in relation to each of the concepts.

Table 3. Full Results of Frequency and Weights of Key Terms

|                  | Organisational Trust | Organisational Distrust |
|------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
|                  |                      |                         |
| #  | Term              | Frequency | Weight | Frequency | Weight |
|----|-------------------|-----------|--------|-----------|--------|
| 1  | Competent         | 13        | 33     | 1         | 1      |
| 2  | Honest            | 22        | 75     | -         | -      |
| 3  | Moral             | 10        | 28     | -         | -      |
| 4  | Accountable       | 11        | 32     | -         | -      |
| 5  | Open              | 9         | 26     | -         | -      |
| 6  | Credible          | 16        | 51     | -         | -      |
| 7  | Powerful          | 1         | 2      | 6         | 20     |
| 8  | Ethical           | 18        | 54     | -         | -      |
| 9  | Reliable          | 17        | 52     | -         | -      |
| 10 | Respectful        | 12        | 32     | -         | -      |
| 11 | Incompetent       | -         | -      | 10        | 30     |
| 12 | Dishonest         | -         | -      | 17        | 65     |
| 13 | Immoral           | -         | -      | 6         | 21     |
| 14 | Unaccountable     | -         | -      | 17        | 42     |
| 15 | Closed-off        | -         | -      | 6         | 16     |
| 16 | Unbelievable      | -         | -      | 4         | 10     |
| 17 | Weak              | -         | -      | 5         | 11     |
| 18 | Unethical         | -         | -      | 17        | 61     |
| 19 | Unreliable        | -         | -      | 11        | 30     |
| 20 | Disrespectful     | -         | -      | 10        | 37     |
| 21 | Considerate       | 6         | 11     | -         | -      |
| 22 | Benevolent        | 4         | 16     | -         | -      |
| 23 | Self-sacrificing  | 1         | 4      | -         | -      |
| 24 | Integrity         | 15        | 53     | -         | -      |
| 25 | Cautious          | -         | -      | 2         | 8      |
| 26 | Genuine           | 15        | 46     | -         | -      |
| 27 | Sincere           | 5         | 11     | -         | -      |
| 28 | Kind              | 4         | 13     | -         | -      |
| 29 | Generous          | 7         | 27     | -         | -      |
| 30 | Transparent       | 13        | 33     | 1         | 4      |
| 31 | Inconsiderate     | -         | -      | 7         | 22     |
| 32 | Malevolent        | -         | -      | 3         | 10     |
| 33 | Self-interested   | 1         | 1      | 17        | 42     |
| 34 | Lack of Integrity | -         | -      | 15        | 46     |
| 35 | Reckless          | -         | -      | 10        | 32     |
| 36 | Disingenuous      | -         | -      | 4         | 14     |
| 37 | Insincere         | -         | -      | 8         | 20     |
| 38 | Unkind            | -         | -      | 2         | 5      |
| 39 | Greedy            | -         | -      | 13        | 36     |
| 40 | Secretive         | -         | -      | 8         | 17     |
| 200| 600              | 200       | 600    |

Note: The frequency and weights that are bolded in the above table highlight the six most frequently cited and highlight weighted terms for each concept.
Organisational Trust

A total of 20 different terms were used by participants to describe organisational trust. The most frequently used terms included: honest \((n = 22)\), ethical \((n = 18)\), reliable \((n = 17)\), credible \((n = 16)\), integrity \((n = 15)\) and genuine \((n = 15)\). These were also the most highly weighted terms by participants, however they were prioritised in a slightly different order: honest \((75)\), ethical \((54)\), integrity \((53)\), reliable \((52)\), credible \((51)\) and genuine \((46)\).

Organisational Distrust

A total of 24 terms were used to describe organisational distrust. The most frequently used terms to describe organisational distrust included: dishonest \((n = 17)\), unaccountable \((n = 17)\), unethical \((n = 17)\), self-interested \((n = 17)\), lack of integrity \((n = 15)\) and greedy \((n = 13)\). Five of these terms were also the mostly highly weighted apart from greedy which was surpassed by disrespectful. The highly weighted terms were: dishonest \((65)\), unethical \((61)\), lack of integrity \((46)\), unaccountable \((42)\), self-interested \((42)\) and disrespectful \((37)\).

Individual participants use of directly opposite terms for trust and distrust

The second phase of data analysis reviewed the individual participants’ responses to identify whether participants utilised directly opposite terms to describe organisational trust and distrust. There was a total of 200 opportunities for directly opposite terms to be used by participants for organisational trust and distrust. As identified in Table 4, a total of 59 directly opposite terms were utilised representing 29.5% of the total 200, suggesting that the majority of terms used by participants to describe trust and distrust were not directly opposite.

Table 4.

Frequency of directly opposite terms used at the organisation level

| Directly Opposite Terms            | Frequency of Terms Used |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Honest & Dishonest                 | 10                      |
| Ethical & Unethical                | 10                      |
| Integrity & Lack of Integrity      | 7                       |
| Reliable & Unreliable              | 6                       |
| Competent & Incompetent            | 5                       |
| Accountable & Unaccountable        | 4                       |
| Generous & Greedy                  | 4                       |
| Considerate & Inconsiderate        | 3                       |
| Transparent & Secretive            | 3                       |
| Open & Closed-off                  | 2                       |
| Moral & Immoral                    | 1                       |
| Credible & Unbelievable            | 1                       |
When breaking the data down further at the individual level three participants used three out of five directly opposite terms, 19 participants used two out of five directly opposite terms, 12 participant used one out of five directly opposite terms and six participants did not use any directly opposite terms to describe organisational trust and distrust. No participant used four out of five or all five directly opposite terms to describe organisational trust and distrust. A total of 15 different opposite term pairings (i.e. competent and incompetent) were identified by participants to describe organisational trust and distrust in the study. The most commonly used pair of opposite terms to describe trust and distrust at the organisational level was ethical and unethical ($n = 10$), followed by honest and dishonest ($n = 10$) and integrity and lack of integrity ($n = 7$).

**Discussion**

**Trust at the organisational level**

Reflecting on the frequency and weight data for organisational trust, these findings support some of the key literature on conceptualising organisational trust by Mayer *et al.* (1995) and Hon and Grunig (1999), most explicitly the term integrity. Interestingly, honesty was identified by participants as both the most frequently cited and highly weighted term for organisational trust. While honesty may often be assumed to be embedded within other elements of trust, as a term itself it is often not represented in the literature. This could potentially reflect a changing expectation of the public when it comes to organisational trust. This type of adaption in how we view and conceptualise key concepts such as trust is supported by Bachmann and Inkpen (2011) who suggest that as scholars we need to abandon the idea that trust is a universal concept that remains the same at any time and everywhere. Accordingly, recent scandals and crises particularly within the Australian and international context could be priming the public to place more value on honesty from organisations than previously.

Another noteworthy finding from the data was that the term competent was not within the top six cited or weighted terms for organisational trust, although it did come in at seventh position.
with the same frequency and weight as transparency. This presents a slight disparity with the literature, as Hon and Grunig (1999) identify competence as a key element of trustworthiness and as discussed in the literature review Mayer et al. (1995) similarly state that ability is a key element of trustworthiness. While competence may be an important element for building trust in the beginning stages of an organisation-public relationship, it appears at least within this dataset that it is not a primary term used to describe an organisation that a stakeholder has developed trust in, with other factors being deemed more influential.

**Trust and distrust opposites or separate concepts**

Comparing the most frequently used and highly weighted words for trust and distrust at the organisational level, it is apparent that three terms for both concepts are direct opposites (i.e. honest and dishonest, ethical and unethical and integrity and lack of integrity). However the remaining frequently cited and highly weighted terms for the concepts are not direct opposites. This suggests that while there are terms that may sit on a spectrum that influence people’s perceptions of both trust and distrust such as honesty and ethics, there also appear to be a number of terms that only impact trust or distrust separately. As such, at the whole data-set level these finding support the view that while trust and distrust are related concepts that have some key elements in common, most participants perceive trust and distrust as distinct and not directly opposite.

This position was amplified when the data were examined at the individual level. That is, of the 200 opportunities for participants to utilise directly opposite words only 29.5 percent of these opportunities were taken. Further, 92 percent of participants utilised only two out of five or fewer directly opposite words to describe the concepts of organisational trust and distrust. These findings provide empirical support for trust and distrust as distinct constructs in line with existing work in the public relations literature (see Kang and Park, 2017; Shen, 2017; Yang et al., 2015; Moon and Rhee, 2013). Accordingly, this provides support for further exploration of distrust as a separate and distinct concept to trust.

**Distrust at the organisational level**

Comparing the findings from the current study to the existing literature reveals several potential commonalities and other conceptualisation gaps in regards to organisational distrust. First, when considering the existing scale items in the literature (see Table 1), there appears to be some links between the terms identified in this study. Specifically, the scale items proposed by Kang and Park (2017) and Yang et al. (2015) around lying to increase profits, deceiving stakeholders and not taking accountability may relate to the terms of dishonest, unaccountable and greedy that were identified by participants in this study. Furthermore, the scale item proposed by Shen (2017), that
suggests the organisation will engage in damaging and harmful behaviour to pursue its own interest, may align to the concept of self-interest. Despite alignment between some of the scale items previously proposed in the literature and the terms identified by participants, there are also discrepancies.

The current study’s findings do not neatly reflect all the items included in existing scales for organisational distrust (Kang and Park, 2017; Shen, 2017; Yang et al., 2015; Moon and Rhee, 2013). Specifically, the top six most frequently cited and highly weighted terms are not explicitly identified by any of the authors in their conceptualisations of the concept of organisational distrust. Furthermore, the elements of malevolence (Kang and Park, 2017; Yang et al., 2015; Moon and Rhee, 2013) and incompetence (Shen, 2017) were only identified by three and ten participants respectively. Accordingly these findings begin to suggest that further research into distrust as a concept is warranted.

The findings from this study do however provide a platform to propose a conceptualisation of distrust for further exploration. Building upon the most frequently identified terms by participants in this study, organisational distrust can be conceptualised as a perception that an organisation is dishonest, unaccountable and unethical and will act in a way that is self-interested. This conceptualisation provides opportunity for future studies to build on.

Practical & Social Implications

As industry reports continue to profess that we are experiencing record levels of distrust in our organisations and institutions (Edelman, 2019), it can be argued that exploring and understanding the concept of distrust has become even more pressing. From the initial findings in the current study, it is proposed that there is support for organisational distrust to be considered and studied as a separate and distinct concept to organisational trust within the corporate communications and public relations literature. Developing a more comprehensive conceptualisation of organisational trust and distrust is important for both communication scholars and practitioners as it allows for a more accurate understanding of relationship quality between stakeholders and organisations. Accordingly, being able to identify if a specific stakeholder group has a distrusting perception of an organisation and the components that have contributed to this perception, will help communication professionals identify the real source of the problem and help to develop more effective communication strategies to repair the relationship. It is the authors’ hope that this study provides the basis for further exploration of organisational distrust and specifically how the terms dishonest, unaccountable, unethical, self-interested, lack of integrity, disrespectful and greedy contribute to its conceptualisation.
Limitations and further research directions

As with all studies, the current research has some limitations. In regards to the results it is worth noting that three out of 40 participants did identify three out of five directly opposite words for organisational trust and distrust. While these participants’ perceptions do not align to the majority of the dataset it is apparent that some participants may think of organisational trust and distrust as opposite terms. The sample size of this study may also reduce the integrity of these findings. As such further testing of this method in a larger sample is recommended.

A further limitation relates to the manner in which the card-sort question was constructed. As the authors wanted to keep the findings as widely generalisable as possible, an industry or type of organisation for all participants to think of was not specified. While this allowed participants to identify organisations of their choice, it could raise some limitations to the results as participants may identify different conceptualisations of trust and distrust for different types of organisations (e.g. profit vs not for profit organisations). As such, further applications of this method using a specified and similar sample of organisation types could be beneficial.

In addition to further exploration of the concept of organisational distrust through replication of the card-sort methodology, research that explores and tests the effectiveness of strategies focussed on reducing public perceptions of organisational self-interest, greed and unaccountability or combatting views of dishonesty and how this impacts perceptions of organisational distrust could be proposed. We believe that by furthering our understanding of the conceptual notions of distrust, communication scholars and professionals are able to better address the growing levels of distrust in today’s society through more targeted communication strategies.

Conclusions

This research has provided empirical insights to position organisational distrust as a distinct construct in the corporate communications literature. From these findings, trust and distrust are related but distinct concepts and not simply opposite ends of one continuum. This is important for communication and public relations scholars and practitioners as it also suggests that different communication strategies may be needed to rebuild trust and reduce distrust. This study provides a basis for further investigation of what these strategies may be.
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Appendix 1.

List of Terms for Card-Sort Methodology

| Competent      | Incompetent   |
|----------------|---------------|
| Honest         | Dishonest     |
| Moral          | Immoral       |
| Accountable    | Unaccountable |
| Open           | Closed-off    |
| Credible       | Unbelievable  |
| Powerful       | Weak          |
| Ethical        | Unethical     |
| Reliable       | Unreliable    |
| Respectful     | Disrespectful |
| Considerate    | Inconsiderate |
| Benevolent     | Malevolent    |
| Self-sacrificing| Self-interested|
| Integrity      | Lack of Integrity |
| Cautious       | Reckless      |
| Genuine        | Disingenuous  |
| Sincere        | Insincere     |
| Kind           | Unkind        |
| Generous       | Greedy        |
| Transparent    | Secretive     |