

Relational Trust and Distrust: Ingredients of Face-to-Face and Media-based Communication

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Abstract The analysis of relational trust and distrust between human actors is a promising but underdeveloped part of trust research. Instead of a scenario in which a trustor observes a trustee and therefore strategically gives him or her a credit of trust, the concept of relational trust focuses on the interaction and trust relationship between the actors. Here, we argue that relational trust and distrust are both part of an intersubjective “shared identity” between the interactants. We further explore their role in reciprocal face-to-face and media-based relationships. In this context, relational trust is defined as an essential communicational ingredient that enables interaction and the growth of human relationships through mutual confidence. Relational distrust, in contrast, helps interactants avoid risky relationships because it leads to skepticism within the relationship. We consider both relational trust and distrust to be ongoing communicational parts of any interaction. Based on our definition, we introduce an analytical model for further examination.

Keywords Relational trust • Relational distrust • Intersubjectivity • Copresence • Social presence

1 Introduction

In the discipline of Communication Studies, trust is a term with different interpretations. Most of the attention is focused on questions regarding the credibility of sources (Reich 2011a; Lankes 2008) or the systemic trust in and reliability of institutionalized journalism (Kohring 2004; Blöbaum 2014; Dernbach 2005; Quandt 2012). Fewer studies have been published about the role of mass communication in building media-based trust relationships. For instance, traditional mass media play an essential role in how we trust public actors such as politicians, corporations and entire systems, e.g., the health system (compare Sandvoss 2012). The introduction of social media brought new types of media-based trust relationships with people who appear publicly through their online profiles: Renting sites such as *AirBnB* offer cheap lodging in private apartments, dating apps such as

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Tinder offer romance based on social relatedness, and transportation apps such as *Lyft* offer a cheap ride based on geographical proximity (Tanz 2014). Although the concepts behind these services are nothing new, people use these applications with a whole new type of involvement. Many areas of their private lives, such as their living space and their cars, are commoditized in a way that they can be used and shared by others.

These examples show that more future research should focus on how trust is mediated through the use of mass communication and what the differences are, depending on the various types of communication. In this theoretical chapter, we would like to address this research gap and explore the role of trust in “connecting” people through media-based interaction. Although most of the current trust research is based on a rational concept of trust that has originated in game theory and introduces a scenario in which individuals make themselves strategically vulnerable to others (Loomis 1959; compare Mayer et al. 1995), we would like to explore a different perspective on trust that defines it as a social “connective tissue” between people (compare Endreß 2008). It is our belief that this type of *relational* trust should be considered an integral part of reciprocal relationships. In this context, we will define relational trust as a form of an assumed “shared identity” between two or more actors that is established through face-to-face or media-based interaction.

In the first part of this chapter, we will develop a concept of relational trust and distrust as a “shared identity” in face-to-face situations. In the second part, we will use social presence theory (Short et al. 1976) to apply this basic definition to mediated relationships, focusing on three scenarios: (1) the mediated relationship between interactants who are connected by *traditional information and communication technologies (ICT)*, (2) the mediated relationship between recipients and public actors who are covered by *institutionalized mass media* and (3) the mediated relationship between users in online social networks generated by *social media*. Finally, we will propose a general model of relational trust and distrust that should be further discussed and explored.

2 Interpersonal Relational Trust and Distrust

2.1 *Relational Trust and Distrust as Components of Reciprocal Relationships*

Trust research is a complex, cross-disciplinary field that includes different definitions and theories. It can be better described as a “meso” concept, “integrating micro-level psychological processes and group dynamics with institutional arrangements” (Rousseau et al. 1998, p. 393). Although economists view trust as “either calculative [...] or institutional”, psychologists “focus on a host of internal cognitions that personal attributes yield”. Sociologists, on the other side, “find trust in socially embedded properties and relationships among people [...] and institutions” (Rousseau et al. 1998, p. 393).

Although we understand trust as a social construct, we see these definitions as complementary rather than contradictory. In our understanding, relational trust is a multi-dimensional meta-cognitive but social process that constitutes human relationships by giving both sides the individual assumption of a “shared identity”. This is a deviation from a traditional understanding: Trust is usually marked by a unidimensional approach that defines it as a cognitive and emotional psychological state. A trustor, under risky circumstances, develops a willingness to become vulnerable towards a trustee based on the perceived ability, benevolence, and integrity (Mayer et al. 1995; compare McKnight and Chervany 2001; Wang and Emurian 2005).

Recently, more scholars have used a “two-dimensional” approach that deviates from the idea that trust and distrust are on two symmetrical sides of the same scale (Lewicki et al. 1998, p. 446). Instead, they are understood as two different and sometimes competing constructs. Following this other consideration, trust can be defined in terms of “confident positive expectations regarding another’s conduct, and distrust in terms of confident negative expectations regarding another’s conduct” (Lewicki et al. 1998, p. 439).

In other words, relational trust and distrust exist simultaneously, and they both shape interdependent multiplex relationships. To emphasize their point, Lewicki et al. combine *high trust*, *low trust*, *high distrust* and *low distrust* to explain four scenarios (2006, p. 1003):

1. Relationships that feature *low distrust* and *low trust* are characterized by “casual acquaintances” and “limited interdependence” and allow for “professional courtesy”.
2. Relationships that feature *low distrust* but *high trust* are characterized by “high value congruence” and allow for “new initiatives”, which, in many situations, is basically an ideal scenario.
3. Relationships that feature *high distrust* and *high trust* are “highly segmented and bounded relationships” in which “opportunities are pursued and downside risks [and] vulnerabilities [are] continually monitored”.
4. Relationships that feature *high distrust* and *low trust* are characterized by the assumption of “harmful motives” and “paranoia”.

These four combinations demonstrate that relational trust and distrust are reciprocal and multiplex, which allows for various types of interaction in different situations. If two friends are working together, it is possible that there is *high trust* and *low distrust* on a private level but on that a professional level, there is *high distrust* and *less trust*. This suggests that in “all but the most primitive and simplistic relationships, we relate to each other in multiple ways” (Lewicki et al. 1998, p. 442). A human relationship can be defined through various contexts simultaneously, e.g., through friendship, professions, social milieu or experiences. Each different context comes with a different set of positive or negative assumptions about another’s conduct and therefore with a different set of relational trust and distrust.

2.2 *The Non-Rationality of Relational Trust and Distrust*

The concept of trust as a multifaceted construct that leads to different types of relationships focuses on the complexity of *intersubjectivity* between two sides rather than on only one trustor “observing” a trustee. For all the reasons mentioned above, the concept of “relational trust” can be separated from more reflective concepts such as “deterrence-based trust”, “calculus-based trust” or “institution-based trust” (Rousseau et al. 1998, pp. 398–401) because it is not dependent on only one “spectator”. This concept emphasizes that “trust must be conceived as a property of collective units (ingoing dyads, groups and collectivities), not of isolated individuals. Being a collective attribute, trust is applicable to the relations among people rather than to their psychological states taken individually” (Lewis and Weigert 1985, p. 968). We will argue that relational trust and distrust are assumptions that are based on both a psychological process and the interaction between actors in a relationship.

In some parts of the literature, distrust, in contrast to trust, is defined as rationally based expectations and a form of social control (Barber 1983, pp. 21–23). Based on the definition of Lewicki et al., and contrary to a rational explanation, we understand relational distrust as a social construct that is equally intuitive and interdependent as relational trust. To be precise, *relational trust* is better understood as a social bonding mechanism that reduces vigilance and the awareness of potential risks in this relationship through an induced optimism (compare Sperber et al. 2010). *Relational distrust* is a mechanism that divides people by inducing skepticism and vigilance towards each other. This might lead to a higher reflection of the other side but not necessarily to rational behavior. According to Luhmann, distrust has a function similar to trust because it also creates order and reduces complexity but with a higher effort of control (1968, pp. 69–76). For instance, a professional business relationship might be successful when both parties involved perceive a level of distrust and therefore introduce careful negotiations about mutual expectations.

The general idea behind this non-rational approach on relational trust and distrust is the difficulty of a worldview that defines social relationships as entirely subjective and rational transactions. In trust or distrust scenarios defined by rationality, two parties perceive each other as potentially dangerous and give each other some type of “credit of trust”, which can be a “willingness to be vulnerable” (Mayer et al. 1995). In the “trust game”, a popular behavioral measure of trust and trustworthiness and a variation of the “dictator game”, the trust credit is given by an isolated individual as an often conscious and rational decision (Johnson and Mislin 2011). In these scenarios, it is assumed that people are constantly “taking a risk” in social relationships, if only on a cognitive and emotional level. It is our assumption that most informal relationships that include a high degree of relational trust do not feature this type of high risk awareness. In our understanding, relational trust and distrust are basically features of *any* informal reciprocal relationship and might vary in their degree, alignment and “openness” for transactions.

For an observation of relational trust and distrust from *within* social relationships, we need to emphasize that relationships, in this context, are defined as continuous, growing interdependencies. Relationships build dynamic, ongoing ties that have a timeframe and a varying degree of reciprocity. These ties *change*; they can grow or shrink. From a network theory perspective, humans are connected through either weak or strong (undirected or directed) ties, whose strength is defined by reciprocal services, time, (emotional) intensity and mutual confiding or intimacy (Granovetter 1983). We assume that these factors of tie strength are influenced by the relational trust and distrust found in a tie. In the literature, additional features such as social distance, emotional support and the social structure have been investigated (Goldbeck 2013, pp. 66–68). These are primarily features of *undirected* ties. Although there are several open questions regarding the strength of *directed* ties (Ruef 2002, pp. 430–432), we assume that the strength of directed ties can be measured through directed features such as participation, support and emotional involvement.

It should be noted that Granovetter chooses not to define trust explicitly in his original theory, “regarding trust as a property either of individuals or of the emotional content, common understandings, or reciprocities of their interpersonal relationships” (Shapiro 1987, p. 625). Above all, relational trust and distrust are considered basic ingredients of social ties and human relationships, and they are only possible if at least two sides, which individually perceive each other, are involved. Although trust is “functionally necessary for the continuance of harmonious relationships, its actual continuance in any particular social bond is always problematic” (Lewis and Weigert 1985, p. 969).

Without the reflective, calculus-driven interpretation of trust, new questions arise. Instead of asking how humans manage dangerous situations or interactions with potentially malevolent others in a world full of risks, we should ask why they interact with each other or, alternatively, what stops them from connecting. We assume that relational trust and distrust are present once two or more actors develop a reciprocal relationship. This means that relational trust and distrust are linked directly to interdependence. This intuitive and non-calculative type of trust (or distrust) is less prominent in the literature but is arguably a major incentive (or disincentive) for interpersonal or interorganizational interaction (Endreß 2012)¹. Consequently, its role in face-to-face and media-based communication should be further explored.

2.3 *Relational Trust and Distrust as “Shared Identity”*

In the literature, relational trust is often referred to as “identity-based trust”. In most definitions, this type of trust is linked only to longer-term relationships that have

¹ See Endreß’ concept of pre-reflective, “operating trust” (“fungierendes Vertrauen”) for a similar approach.

developed a deep sense of familiarity (Rousseau et al. 1998, p. 399). For instance, when two colleagues have worked together for over 20 years, they have developed an affective, identity-based form of trust.

In this chapter, we would like to use a broader concept of identity-based trust that can also be applied to new relationships and is more dynamic in nature. This type of trust is not a static entity but a constant ongoing social identification process that “involves not only personal identities but also collective identities” (Möllering 2013, pp. 7–9). If we believe that human beings are in a continuous state of social identification with other actors (including people, groups or institutions), we can argue that on a meta-cognitive level, they constantly process other actors with each observation or interaction through the perception of “shared identities”.

In this context, the term “shared identity” is not necessarily limited to similarities or commonalities, as suggested by the psychological research on “shared reality” (compare Echterhoff 2014). It also goes beyond an “encapsulated interest”, in which one side includes the other side into their cognition (Hardin 2004, pp. 7–11). Moreover, “shared identity” refers to an assumed mutual horizon, an *intersubjective identity* that is based on actual copresence (compare Lewicki 2003). According to Goffman, “copresence renders persons uniquely accessible, available, and subject to another” (Goffman 1963, p. 22). In this sense, copresence refers to the “psychological connection to and with another [interaction partner]”, requiring that “interactants feel they [are] able to perceive their interaction partner and that their interaction partner actively perceive[s] them” (Nowak and Biocca 2003, p. 482).

According to Schütz, we constantly construct current meaning in any interaction by internally processing our past and future as retentive and protective narrations (1974, pp. 62–95). This enables us to act regarding the future based on the knowledge of the past. We argue that in many situations that feature other actors, this narration is defined by a “togetherness” of at least two parties. In the context of the theory of “collective identity”, our concept of trust as a shared identity can be described as “an interactive and shared definition” regarding future conduct (Melucci 1995, p. 44).

Based on the consideration of shared identity as an interactional process, our definition of *relational trust* refers to the assumption that the other side has convergent expectations about future conduct and will talk, behave and act as one (ideally) would. In contrast, *relational distrust* refers to the assumption that the other side has divergent expectations about future conduct and will not act as one (ideally) would. Therefore, negotiation and monitoring are more necessary in a high-distrust scenario.

We assume that based on this concept of a perceived convergent or divergent “shared identity”, humans are more capable of coping with the general insecurity of social relationships. As an extension of the definition featured in Lewicki et al. 1998, we propose the following definitions of relational trust and distrust:

1. We define relational trust as the *assumption of convergent mutual expectations about future conduct* between one actor and other actors in social relationships.

2. We define relational distrust as the *assumption of divergent mutual expectations about future conduct* between one actor and other actors in social relationships.

In a sense, relational trust and distrust are ways of using one's own individual horizon of experience and self-reflected conduct as an intuitive assumption tool for another's conduct. By synchronizing our past actions, experiences and observations with the idea of our own (idealized) future behavior, we are able to assume converging or diverging expectations about the future conduct of others. We believe that this happens continuously with each interaction. Relational trust and distrust as assumptions make it easy to form new relationships without effort and avoid relationships that might be stressful or do us harm.

Consequently, a relationship that is characterized by *high mutual relational trust* usually has a great degree of retentive familiarity (regarding past experiences) and mutual protective confiding (regarding future conduct; compare definitions in Luhmann 2001; Schütz 1974). In an ongoing tie, trust "self-regulates" social relationships and allows us to have a continuous, confident "default status" without effort. This "connective" role marks its significance. When there is *high mutual trust*, we are not overly vigilant, and we perceive low risks of future conduct. Even when there is no continuous reciprocity, we assume that the relationship is working to our advantage. A relationship that is characterized by *high mutual distrust* can be considered equally self-regulated because both sides fail to become involved with each other, negotiate behavioral rules and sanctions or even refuse to interact (compare Lewicki et al. 2006, p. 1003). A diverging mutual expectation about future conduct can help us avoid risky relationships or help us to negotiate, monitor or control. The degree of distrust, much like the degree of trust, might vary from relationship to relationship or even culturally (Whaley 2001).

We have described trust and distrust as part of shared identities that are perceived on both sides individually but not necessarily in sync. It must be emphasized that this type of assumption is true only for social relationships that are not completely formalized. In a hypothetical setting of a completely formalized relationship (e.g., between a school teacher and a student), there is no need for relational trust or distrust because this relationship is defined and structured by behavioral rules and sanctions. A person can interact without the need of assuming the other side's expectations. Relational trust and distrust are necessary only when there are risks. By reflecting our own behavior onto others and creating an inter-subjective space as we interact with them, we are able to draw assumptions about others' conduct similar (or different) to ours without the need to negotiate it. According to the definition of Renn and Klinke², risks in relationships are defined as the uncertainty, complexity or ambiguity of future conduct (compare Renn and Klinke 2003)—which is particularly true for (partly) informal and multiplex relationships. We assume that the salience of risks and securities could be influenced by

² Risks must not be confused with an actual threat or a specific danger. In this context, a risk can be defined as an insecurity about the contingencies of an interaction, including potential threats and opportunities. Contrary to risks such as uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity, relationships can also feature securities such as certainty, disambiguity or simplicity

external stimuli such as new information, individual disposition, e.g., one's trust propensity, or the degree of familiarity with that interactional partner.

2.4 Dimensions of Relational Trust and Distrust

So far, we have established a dynamic concept of relational trust and distrust that defines them as features of ongoing relationships, focusing on the uncertainty, ambiguity or complexity (risks) of future conduct. According to Lewicki et al., relational trust and distrust lead to confident or skeptical behavior within a relationship (2006, p. 1003). This marks their importance for the strength of relational ties; for instance, a tie that features *high trust* and *low distrust* likely features *high confidence* and *low skepticism*. In this case, intimate types of interaction such as reciprocal services or mutual confiding are more likely. To examine the role of relational trust and distrust for traditional and media-based relationships, we need to address the communicational aspect of our definition. According to Lewis and Weigert, the underlying process behind trust can be divided into three distinctive analytical dimensions of communicated content: *behavioral*, *cognitive* and *affective*³ dimensions. These are, in reality “interpenetrating and mutually supporting aspects of the one, unitary experience and social imperative we simply call ‘trust’” (1985, p. 972).

According to Lewis and Weigert, all three types of content are communicated simultaneously and also interfere with each other. Although their multi-dimensional definition stems from a tradition that defines trust as subjective and unidirectional, we would like to use their framework for our relational definition, which is defined by the perception of reciprocity and a shared identity. As we have noted, we understand the concept of intersubjectively shared identity as the assumption of a “shared” horizon. To better understand this concept of a shared identity in the context of a multi-dimensional definition, we would like to refer again to the theory of “collective identities”. According to Melucci, collective identities are, similarly to Lewis and Weigert’s concept of trust, developed on a behavioral, cognitive and affective dimension⁴. They are all part of a process that is “constructed and negotiated through a repeated activation of the relationships that link individuals (or groups)” (Melucci 1995, pp. 44–46). It is our objective to define relational trust as a shared identity that, in reciprocal relationships, is communicated on these three dimensions and encourages repeated activation of the relationship (see Table 1 and Fig. 1)

³ Lewis and Weigert use *affective* and *emotional* synonymously.

⁴ See Melucci’s definitions of “cognitive definitions”, “active relationships” and “emotional investment”.

Table 1 Communication of relational trust and distrust through copresence

Dimension	Intersubjectivity through	Content	Communicated by
Behavioral	Exchange	Experience of interaction	<u>Direct interaction</u> such as <i>attendance, eye contact, exchange, conversation, competition, cooperation, collaboration, accommodation, transaction</i> , . . .
Cognitive	Reflection	Perceived trustworthiness	<u>Personal information</u> such as <i>reputation, image, credibility, reliability</i> , . . .
Affective	Association	Sense of belonging	<u>Emotional intensity through social relatedness</u> , <i>attitude, wish fulfillment, ideology, beliefs, symbolic tokens</i> , . . .

Behavioral Dimension

For traditional face-to-face-relationships, *direct interaction* is most likely a key factor for the development of relational trust and distrust (compare Hiltz et al. 1986). In this most basic dimension, the assumption of a shared identity is based on the *experience of interaction*. If a person directly interacts with another person or group, e.g., in a collaboration or in a conversation, this will influence their assumption about convergent or divergent expectations and produce a high or low level of confidence and skepticism⁵. This experience can be marked by different types of conduct, such as *eye contact, conversations* and *simple exchanges*, or through more complex types of interaction, such as *cooperation, collaboration* and *accommodation*. The point that we would like to make here is that *any* interaction, even without further reflection, inhabits some type of relational trust or distrust. Endreß argues that we are constantly in a relational mode when we interact with other people (compare 2008, p. 8). This means that trust is a constant part of the experience of others; it enables the mutual, ongoing perception of each other that is necessary for any interaction. This is not only true for dyads but can also be applied to larger groups. All members of a soccer team, for instance, need to trust each other without the constant necessity of monitoring each other or surveying their perception of each other. In this sense, relational trust and distrust are directly interwoven with the interaction itself and not a result or a prerequisite of interaction. According to Endreß, the interaction itself is the core⁶ of relational trust (2008, pp. 14–15). This means that there is no trust or distrust without interaction or perceived reciprocity.

⁵ This is particularly true for children, who even more strongly rely on the testimony of others and process past experiences such as “the informant’s past inaccuracy, ignorance, uncertainty, or apparent idiosyncrasy” to feed their perceived profile of the other side (Harris 2007, p. 138).

⁶ Translation from the German term “Kernphänomen”.

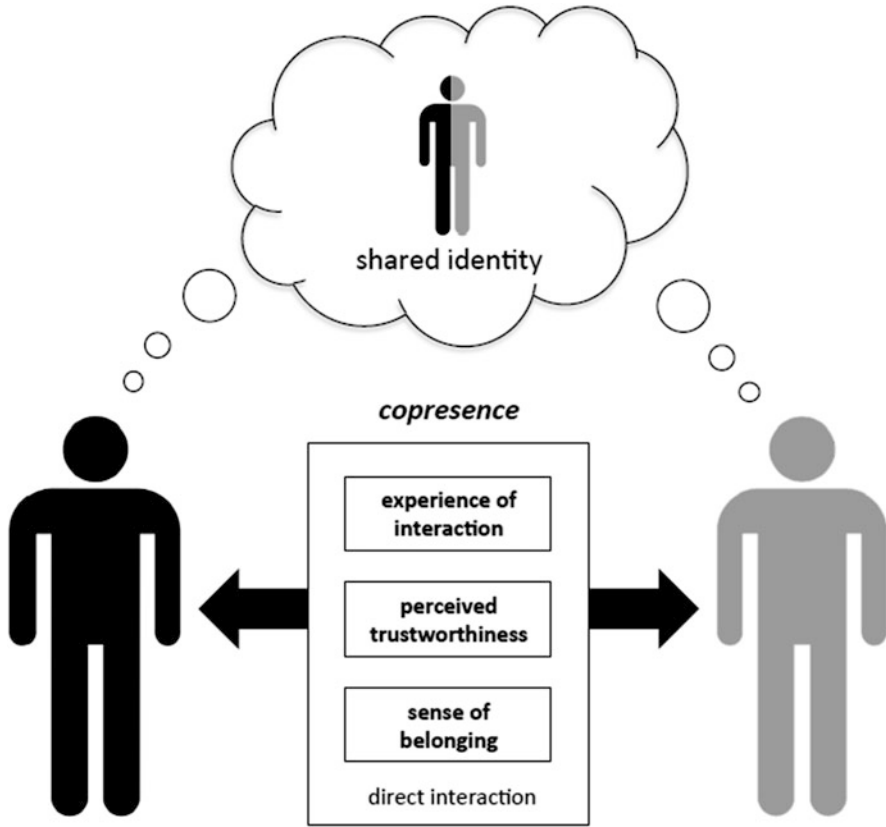


Fig. 1 Relational trust and distrust as shared identity through copresence

Cognitive Dimension

Every interaction with another actor includes a frequent cognitive process of mutual *reflection*. In the interaction itself, but also through the judgment of others, we receive personal information about the other side. “Information processing that is relevant for trust does not happen solely within individual minds of course, but also in all kinds of social processes of communicating and sense-making [...] and is shaped by organizational and institutional contexts as well as social networks” (Möllering 2013, p. 6). Whereas Lewis and Weigert define the cognitive dimension of trust more as a ground for rationality (1985, p. 973), we would like to define this type of information processing as reflective but non-rational (Endreß 2008, p. 8). In our definition, relational trust and distrust are based on the mostly subconscious reflection of the other side. The information on which this reflection is based is the other side’s *trustworthiness*. In our understanding, trustworthiness is a type of information through which trust is communicated or perceived and should “not to be equated with trust” (Möllering 2013, p. 6). It is not an attribute of a person

(compare Bierhoff and Rohmann 2010, p. 78). It can be indicated and communicated through personal information such as a person's *reputation* (others' perception), his or her *image* (self-portrayal) or specific factors such as the *reliability* of his or actions or the *credibility* of what he or she says (compare definitions by Eisenegger 2005, pp. 19–24; Fombrun 1996, pp. 70–72). It is our assumption that by receiving and reflecting personal information, relational trust and distrust can develop in an interaction or, based on the judgment of others, even without any previous mutual exchange. For instance, if we perceive a person as good-looking or if they manage to present themselves in a favorable light, this information will most likely positively influence our relational trust. If we hear other people speak ill of this person, this information will most likely positively influence our relational distrust.

Affective Dimension

On an emotional level, assumptions about shared expectations about future conduct can be caused by the feeling of *association*, resulting in the perception of a shared *sense of belonging*. This might refer not only to a “shared identity” but also to a “collective identity” that can understood as “the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment” (Hagerty et al. 1992, p. 173; as cited in Zhao et al. 2012, p. 576). According to Putnam, this identification and sense of belonging between members of community is directly linked to the social capital of that community (Putnam 2000, pp. 133–147). A strong indicator of the sense of belonging might be the *social relatedness* to a person, group or institution (compare Knox et al. 2006, pp. 133–136). For instance, if the other side is or includes a friend of a friend, it will be easier for us to assume convergent expectations about future conduct based on the emotional intensity of the tie. If the other side is a stranger, we might be much more careful with our assumptions. Other potential indicators are, e.g., *shared beliefs* and *ideologies* or, on a more abstract level, *symbolic tokens* such as logos or brands (compare Reich 2011b, p. 99; Giddens 1991, p. 90). Even more than the cognitive dimension, the affective dimension of relational trust and distrust becomes salient not only when we connect with each other but also when we *exclude* other people, groups or institutions from future interactions. In this case, reflection and association can be even more effectively mobilized to build or affirm assumptions about *diverging* expectations of future conduct. In the most extreme scenarios, this associative relational distrust can be based on emotional reflections regarding ethnicity or political views (compare Whaley 2001; Krastev 2012).

3 Media-based Relational Trust and Distrust

3.1 *Social Presence as a Foundation for Media-based Relational Trust and Distrust*

So far, we have aimed to explain how relational trust and distrust are features of interpersonal relationships whose interdependence is defined primarily by direct interaction and direct copresence. With the expansion and growing complexity of modern societies and the growing importance of mediated communication, trust has become a frequently used and fragmented resource (Frevert 2013). In the transformation from a “face-to-face society to one of widespread anonymity in a demographically large and structurally complicated system, a person often interacts with others who are not known well or even at all” (Lewis and Weigert 1985, p. 973). According to Giddens, these trust relations “are basic to the extended time-space distanciation associated with modernity”, allowing us to use the opportunities of an interconnected, globalized world (1991, p. 87).

To explain how relational trust and distrust can develop in “disembedded”, media-based relationships (compare Giddens 1991, p. 79), we would like to take a look at how in mediated communication, the perception of *copresence* (e.g., in face-to-face situations) is replaced by the *social presence* of the interaction partner. Although social presence and copresence are sometimes used synonymously in parts of the literature (Bailenson et al. 2005), they can be understood as two different concepts. In this context, we use a definition in which social presence is a type of copresence that is perceived not directly but through mediated communication. According to Short et al., “social presence” is defined as “the degree of salience of the other person in a mediated communication and the consequent salience of their interpersonal interactions” (1976, p. 65). In this context, social presence is linked to the perceived “immediacy” and “intimacy” of mediated communication.

Although the original concept of social presence has often been interpreted as the *attribute* of the medium itself, we would like to use a definition that focuses on the *perception* of participants in mediated interactions (Gunawardena 1995, p. 163). This perception is characterized by the “awareness” of another actor and the feeling of “connectedness” with another actor (Rettie 2003). As we have noted, the perception of interaction and the awareness of another actor are, in our understanding, a requirement for relational trust and distrust to develop (compare de Vries 2006). We argue that with this “relational view” on social presence in media-based relationships (Kehrwald 2008, p. 91), relational trust and distrust as assumptions of expectations about future conduct are part of coordinating the future of that relationship.

In the context of our argumentation, the term “media-based relationships” refers to (1) the mediated relationship between interactants who are connected by *traditional information and communication technologies (ICT)*, (2) the mediated relationship between recipients and public actors who are covered by *institutionalized*

mass media or (3) the mediated relationship between users in online social networks generated by *social media*. We believe that in all three types of mediated relationships, the basic mechanics behind relational trust and distrust are the same but are based on different alterations of social presence: To distinguish these three scenarios, we use the terms *interactional presence*, *public presence* and *network presence* as subcategories.

Interactional Presence

We use the term “interactional presence” to refer to the social presence between interactional partners in direct interactions that are based on the use of telecommunications or ICT and are not face-to-face (similar to Short et al.’s original definition (Short et al. 1976)). In this context, Hwang and Park suggest that “when we try to distinguish the experiences of individuals in physical environments from those in mediated environments, our understanding of what it means to feel present and what creates that feeling of social presence becomes a more important issue” (Hwang and Park 2007, p. 846). This means that the feeling of mutual awareness and connectedness, similar to the copresence in face-to-face-situations, is important for the effective use of communication technologies in interpersonal communication such as computer-mediated collaboration (Hwang and Park 2007, pp. 847–848; Weinel et al. 2011). Based on the limitations of the technology’s “interactivity”, which is their potential for interactional use (Neuberger 2007, pp. 43–47), trust content is communicated in direct exchange, either synchronously or disembedded in terms of time and space (see Fig. 2).

Public Presence

Although the concept of social presence has more recently been used for digital and interactional media, we assume that in relationships between recipients and public actors that are covered by institutionalized mass media (such as broadcast media or the printing press), recipients relationally trust or distrust those actors based on their “public presence”. This alteration of social presence is understood as an attribute not of the media but of the “public sphere” created by institutionalized mass media. From a theoretical point of view, this public sphere can be described as “a network of communicational flows”⁷ that generates interactional space for individuals and organizations (Imhof 2008, p. 73). Only through this “public arena” is a broader observation of and participation in what we call society possible (Imhof 2008, p. 74). Through public content, recipients are aware of and feel connected to public actors such as politicians, movie stars and athletes but also groups or institutions.

⁷ We use this as a translation of the German description “Netzwerk von Kommunikationsflüssen”.

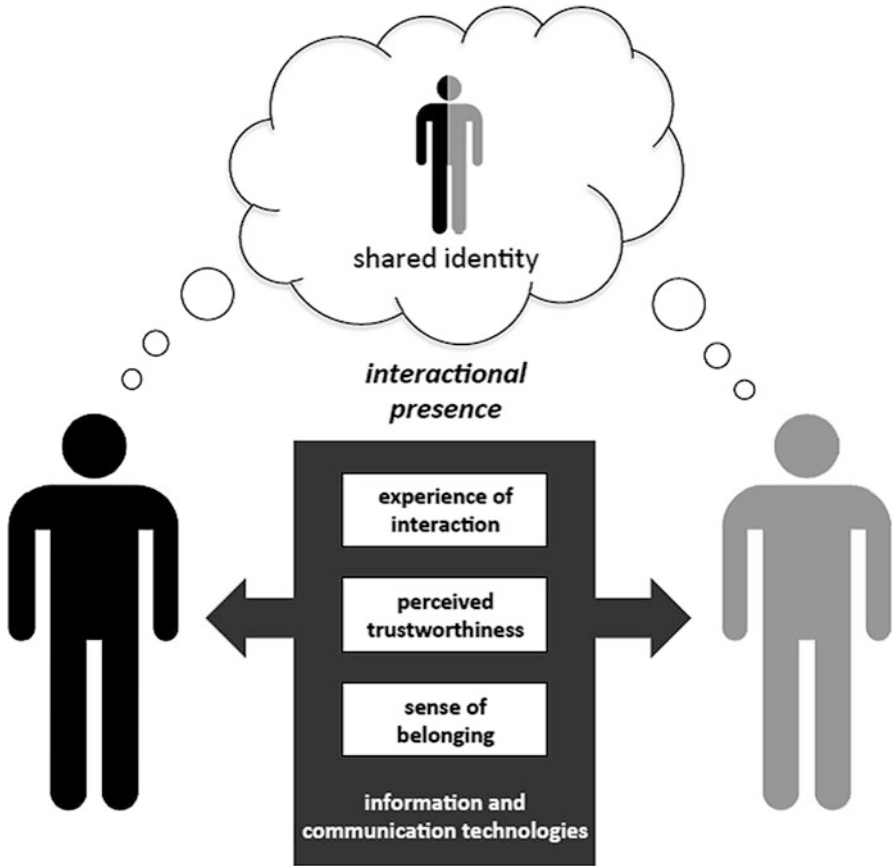


Fig. 2 Relational trust and distrust as shared identity through interactional presence

Professional journalism, public relations and marketing are some of the essential administrators of content that produce this type of media-based immediacy.

In public elections, for instance, an individually shared identity with politicians might be a major reason why citizens are capable of voting (Greene 2004). Public elections usually feature a degree of insecurity and a degree of perceived reciprocity as voters influence the fate of politicians or parties. This is why assumptions about converging or diverging expectations about future conduct are of importance. Particularly if someone lacks political knowledge or expertise, this feeling of connectedness and interactivity with a politician or a party may be a motivation behind his or her voting decision. In this case, relational trust and distrust in a politician reduce complexity (compare Luhmann 1968, p. 8) and might be a voter's "access point" to the complex dynamics of politics (compare Giddens 1991, p. 115). If there is high relational trust, the tie between voters and politicians might be strengthened by participation, emotional involvement or support on the voter's side. In contrast, the assumption of diverging expectations about future

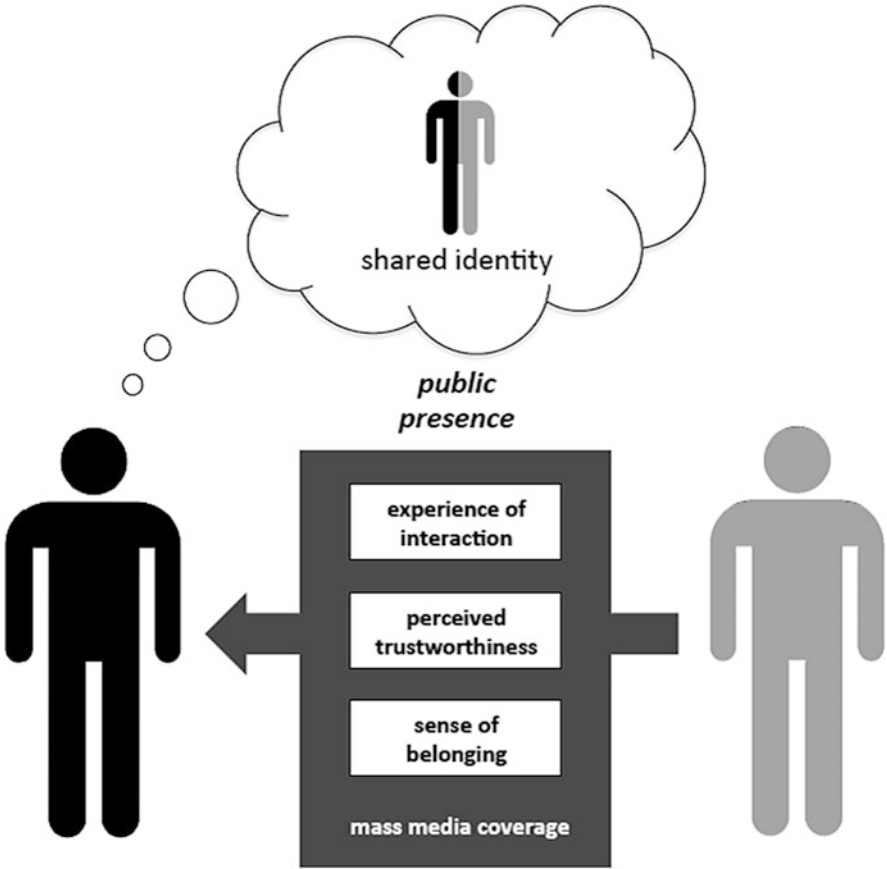


Fig. 3 Relational trust and distrust as shared identity through public presence

conduct may be helpful to decide whom not to vote for and weaken that tie (Zeineddine and Pratto 2014).

Because the relationship between recipients and public actors is primarily unidirectional and usually does not involve much direct interaction, our focus lies on the role of *mass media coverage* for relational trust and distrust in public actors. According to Koopman, in many situations, a feeling of interaction with public actors is salient through the visibility, resonance and perceived legitimacy of mass media content (2004, pp. 373–376). Because this content produces and shapes the individually perceived public presence of an actor and, with it, a level of immediacy, recipients are capable of relationally trusting and distrusting it. It is our assumption that in relationships between recipients and public actors, relational trust and distrust are equally communicated through the experience of interaction, perceived trustworthiness and an affective sense of belonging (see Fig. 3).

Network Presence

Online social networks generated by social media are complex environments for human interaction and interpersonal relationships. Most social media portals feature both the possibility to interact directly with other network participants and to observe them. Participants can interact through communicational devices such as chats or wall posts (compare Sherchan et al. 2013, pp. 20–21) or observe each other through features such as news feeds, personal profiles or reputational systems (compare Botsman and Rogers 2011, pp. 140–143; Howard 2008, p. 16; Astheimer et al. 2011, pp. 19–21). Often, interaction and observation happen simultaneously (Sherchan et al. 2013, p. 21). Based on this dynamic “hybrid” process, network participants can be perceived through either their interactional presence or their public presence. We call this convergence of interactional presence and public presence “network presence” (see Fig. 4).

We assume that shared identities based on the awareness of others and the feeling of connectedness play an essential role in communication inside online

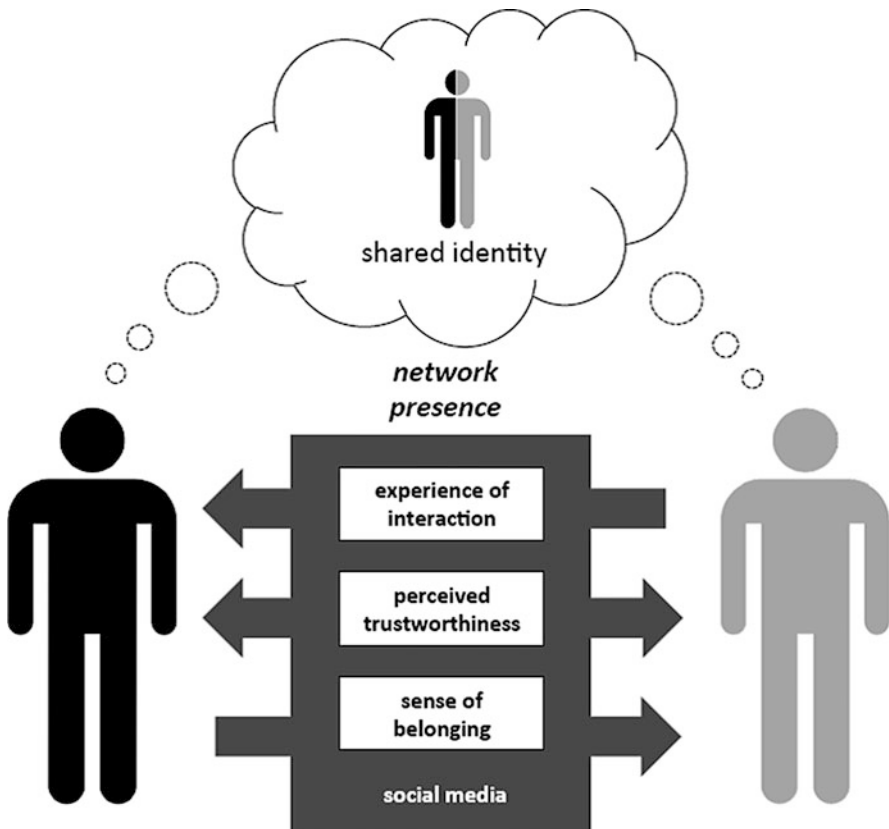


Fig. 4 Relational trust and distrust as shared identity through network presence

social networks. Particularly with new relationships, shared identities are needed to clarify contingencies (compare Thiedeke 2007, pp. 193–197). For instance, if a user wants to book a room on the renting site *AirBnB*, he or she will use the site’s search engine to find suitable options. If there are several rooms that are similar (e.g., featuring the same price, location or tidiness), there might be still risks (uncertainties, ambiguities or complexities (compare Renn and Klink 2003)) regarding the different hosts. Based on reception of the host’s personal profiles, their ratings or shared friends, the user will perceive a varying degree of converging or diverging expectations about future conduct for each host. He or she is further incentivized to personally contact and directly interact with them, whereby their mutual relational trust or distrust is further developed.

This example shows that relational trust and distrust based on network presence are communicated through information that appears to be private (e.g., on personal profiles) but is distributed publicly inside networks (Münker 2009, pp. 115–119). Through this *network diffusion*, e.g., through recommendation systems (compare Andersen et al. 2008), relational trust and distrust can stabilize or destabilize the organizational and systemic structures of the network (compare Zucker 1985). For instance, a high level of relational distrust within a network might nurture social panic or inefficiency, whereas a high level of relational trust might raise the number of reactivations in collaborations or the degree of innovation (compare Karlan et al. 2009; Diekmann et al. 2014; Sundararajan et al. 2013). This “network effect” might also influence network participant’s future ability to develop relational trust or distrust.

3.2 *A Model of Relational Trust and Distrust*

As we have seen, the concept of social presence offers a framework in which relational trust and distrust can be applied to media-based relationships. We need to emphasize that in each of our examples, the perception of a social presence is a fundamental requisite for relational trust and distrust to develop, much as the perception of a copresence is a requisite for relational trust and distrust in face-to-face situations. If recipients or users perceive a sense of reciprocity or “interactional space”, relational trust and distrust are not only possible but also beneficial. This sense of connectedness is also based on the feeling of reliability of the medium itself or the institutions behind it. On a broader level, citizens are dependent on the functionality of the institutions behind traditional mass media and social media. In a sense, they need to trust or rely on these institutions to be able to trust other actors through the use of media. This is true not only for institutionalized journalism (Blöbaum 2014, pp. 37–40) but also for institutions in the new digital economy, such as *Facebook* or *Google*, that have recently been negatively linked to the NSA surveillance scandal (compare Zuboff 2013). If people perceive institutionalized journalism as a “liar press” (Connolly 2015) or social media sites as data surveillance systems, it will be hard for them to profit from the connective power of mass

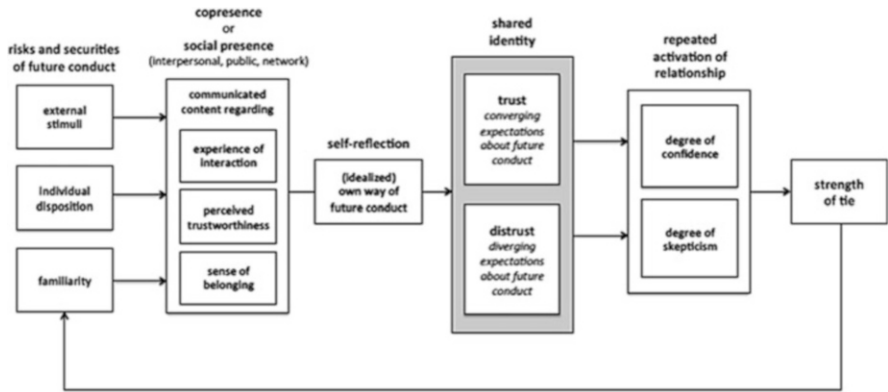


Fig. 5 Relational trust and distrust as shared identity in social relationships

communication. This is why both institutionalized media and new dynamic online social networks are competing for people’s trust and attention (Quandt 2012, pp. 13–14; Castells 2012; Leiterer 2014).

Based on these restrictions, we propose the following model to emphasize how relational trust and distrust are part of a multi-dimensional meta-cognitive social process that affects the repeated activation of relationships and, ultimately, the strength of social ties (see Fig. 5): Informal relationships usually feature a degree of risks (uncertainty, ambiguity or complexity) and a degree of securities (certainty, disambiguity and simplicity) of future conduct. These perceived risks and securities might be influenced by *external stimuli* (e.g., new information), *individual dispositions* (e.g., the propensity to trust) and the *familiarity* between two or more actors. Through relational trust and distrust, people are capable of self-regulating relationships beyond the presence of risks or the lack of securities. By processing the *experience of interaction*, the *perceived trustworthiness* and the *sense of belonging* through *copresence* or an alteration of *social presence* and by balancing them with their own *self-reflection*, people are capable of assuming *converging* or *diverging expectations of future conduct*. We call these assumptions *relational trust* and *distrust*. Together, they form a perceived *shared identity* between two or more actors and influence the *repeated activation of relationships* by raising *confidence* or *skepticism*. We assume that this affects the *strength of ties*, which is directly linked to the *familiarity* and “shared history” between all actors involved.

4 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, we have integrated several theoretical concepts into our model of relational trust and distrust. Such an approach usually comes with certain limitations and downsides, particularly in the space of a book chapter. On a basic

level, further work needs to be put into the theoretical fusion of the ideas behind these theories, particularly considering the implications regarding the concepts of perceived intersubjectivity and shared identity. Nonetheless, this approach demonstrates the general cross-disciplinarity of trust research and offers an understanding of trust that is not based entirely on a rational perspective in which individuals strategically make themselves vulnerable. Only by exploring the complex dynamics behind human face-to-face and media-based interaction is it possible to understand the role of relational trust as a consistent part of human communication. Through our model, we were able to consider the following further research questions:

First, we were able to argue not only that trust is relevant when there are specific dangers or threats but that the insecurity about future conduct is a basic characteristic of informal relationships that are not strictly regulated. In the context of media-based communication, it will be interesting to find out how, for instance, external stimuli such as a public scandal regarding a public person change our perception of the person and what effect they have on the perceived familiarity. Further research should also answer the question how familiarity, e.g., through interaction or media coverage, progresses in the constant reactivation of a relationship.

Based on the research of Lewicki and colleagues, we have also argued that we see trust and distrust not as the strategic actions implied in most of the literature but as assumptions that constantly regulate the induced confidence and skepticism in relationships. This is a much more dynamic understanding of trust and distrust; they “accompany” every communicative act in a relationship. Further research should address the effect of confidence and skepticism on the reactivation of relationships and on the strength of ties between interactants, measuring indicators of directed and undirected strength (e.g., support, or intimacy).

Another implication of our model is that trust and distrust are linked to constant self-reflection. This is an argument that can rarely be found in the specific literature, which usually focuses on trust based on rational observations. The idea that relational trust and distrust as a shared identity intersubjectively emerge out of a reflection of the interactant and a reflection of one’s own leads to further research opportunities, in which both types of reflection should be analyzed, measured and put into relation. This is particularly true for the field of media reception.

We have also argued that in media-based relationships, copresence is “substituted” by different forms of social presence. In this context, it will be necessary to analyze how communicated trust content differs depending on the type of media, e.g., how reputation as an indicator of trustworthiness is communicated through institutionalized mass media or social media. Further research should also focus on relational trust and distrust that are based simultaneously on different forms of (mediated) interaction. For instance, how does a meet-and-greet with a politician influence the perception of his or her institutionalized media appearance or her *Twitter* account?

Based on our model, we hope we have demonstrated the limitations and opportunities of a relational view on trust and distrust in face-to-face and media-based relationships and have offered a framework for future research in the field of Communication Studies.

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