

Where We're Going and Where We've Been: Taking Stock of the Conversation of Trust Research

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The scholarly field of trust research is alive and well. Fueled, in part, by a seemingly unending supply of real-world challenges, scholars from virtually every academic discipline continue to devote considerable attention to the construct. As we continue our efforts to capture the conversation of trust research, we devote the current editorial to taking stock of that conversation. Using *JTR*'s 14 volumes as our lens, we consider the development of the field to this point and outline key future directions.

Where We've Been

Across the 14 volumes published between 2011 and 2024, *JTR* has collected 163 scholarly papers¹. Reflecting our vision for the journal, the majority of these were published as standard articles but we have published a variety of other formats including editorials, invited commentaries, and more (see Figure 1).

[Figure 1 about here]

Evaluation of the titles and abstracts of these papers suggests that their primary contributions center a variety of more-or-less distinct areas of trust research (see Figure 2). Our journal consistently publishes a noteworthy percentage of papers rooted in literatures focused on organizations, interpersonal relationships, and society. Other consistent perspectives include political trust and public administration, as well as work that devotes itself to unpacking the state-of-the-art of the field of trust research itself. Less consistently, we have published work exploring health and international relations, as well as trust in the media, science, and technology.

[Figure 2 about here]

¹ 2011-2014 = 44; 2015-2018 = 55; 2019-2022 = 40; 2023 & 2024 = 24

An evaluation of corresponding authors' primary institutional affiliation² further helps to demonstrate the interdisciplinary footprint of trust research as captured by our journal (see Figure 3). Scholars working in units focused on business and organizations have consistently comprised a significant portion of our authorship, but we have seen an increasingly diverse set of perspectives across our published works. Political science and policy, and psychology have grown steadily over the years, and we have also seen increasing representation from criminal justice, international relations, and technology studies.

[Figure 3 about here]

The keywords assigned to these articles provide even more nuanced insight into the ongoing conversation of trust research (see Table 1). As with the titles and abstracts, there is a good deal of consistency over time. Most notably, the word “social” appears in the keywords of three or more articles in all four periods and is typically associated with concepts highlighting the context (e.g., “social networks,” “social capital,” “newcomer socialization,” and “social exchange”). Similarly, the term “trustworthiness” emerges in three of the four periods and is consistently presented alone. Other recurring keywords like “interpersonal” (e.g., interpersonal trust), “institutions/al” (e.g., informal institutions, institutional theory) and “political” (e.g., political trust, political parties) underscore the diverse contexts in which trust is explored. The term “public” also appears regularly, often in the context of research with direct ties to public administration (e.g., public governance, public sector management). More abstract terms like “theory” (e.g., rational action theory, game theory) and “distrust” also make occasional appearances, usually in work explicitly shaping the conceptual framework of trust research.

[Table 1 about here]

The keywords may also suggest some degree of development in the conversation of trust research over time. Thus, the first two periods suggest a relatively stronger emphasis on conceptual issues while the later periods appear to shift focus to specific contexts. To be sure, assessing repeated keywords is an imperfect approach to evaluating such trends but they may reflect an initial effort to establish a solid conceptual foundation that, over time, enabled expansion into other areas. The more unique keywords in Table 1 are also suggestive of this process. Keywords such as “knowledge” and “uncertainty” appear most often in the first period and seem to highlight foundational issues of the construct. In the second period, terms like “management” and “multi-level” suggest a shift toward organizational considerations and, by the third and fourth, the keywords expand into new areas, including “public,” “political,” and “media,” potentially reflecting broader applications.

In general, these dynamics mesh well with the broader literature of trust, where the most influential approaches often developed in distinct intellectual silos but are increasingly being integrated to answer a widening slate of questions. As a key example, consider interpersonal

² Several corresponding authors provided more than one affiliation, but we proceeded under the assumption that an author with more than one institutional affiliation would list their primary affiliation first.

and societal³ trust. Both areas primarily concern themselves with reducing uncertainty and assuaging vulnerability through relationships, but interpersonal approaches classically draw from psychological perspectives best suited to unpack person-centered dynamics like assessing trustworthiness and fostering commitment within discrete relationships. By contrast, societal approaches are more strongly rooted in sociological and economic approaches that lend themselves to assessing aggregated social dynamics like relationships between groups and flows within them. Organizational research—as an area less defined by its intellectual lens than by its context—often explicitly integrates these interpersonal and societal approaches with the typical (but not exclusive) goal of leveraging the dynamics of trust within or between organizations to increase their efficiency or effectiveness. Public administration similarly draws from a variety of perspectives to understand the dynamics of (inter)organizational effectiveness but is somewhat distinct in that it typically devotes increased attention to public trust in governance actors. Political trust is another conceptually overlapping but traditionally distinct area of trust research in which scholars primarily concern themselves with explaining the large-scale dynamics of the trust citizens place in their political structures. Trust in health, media, science, and technology similarly tend to highlight interpersonal approaches and draw from work—especially on interpersonal trust and public administration—to answer distinct questions. International relations scholarship similarly leverages insights from across areas of trust research, but because it typically conceptualizes trust as something more than a psychological construct, it often explicitly centers aggregate dynamics.

Where We're Going

As part of this stock-taking effort, our Editorial Team also collected and synthesized the author-provided keywords mentioned above and our Editorial Community's reviewer expertise keywords to create a more concise list that accurately represents the scope of our journal and scholarly community. After eliminating literal and conceptual duplicates, the final list of 225 keywords was organized into four categories: "Applications" collects keywords representing scholarly or practical issues that are important as sources (e.g., "socialization"), processes (e.g., "trust development"), or outcomes (e.g., "public health") of trust. "Approaches" centers, especially, methodological considerations and includes lenses like "phenomenology" and "multi-level" and analytic methods like "focus groups" and "networks". "Constructs" was the largest category and included a variety of types of trust (e.g., "generalized trust", "calculative trust", and "swift trust") as well as connected concepts like "confidence", "fairness", "power", and "uncertainty". Finally, "Contexts" refers to the various geographical (e.g., "Asia") and social contexts (e.g., "finance", "austerity", "natural resource management") in which trust is explored.

We then asked our entire Editorial Community to review the categorized list of keywords and highlight those that should be prioritized in future trust research. Fifty-eight editors and editorial board members were invited to prioritize as many keywords as they saw fit, and 43 responded.

³ We use the word "societal" to avoid confusion from the various uses of "social trust" which variously refers to a generalized sense of trust in unnamed others, aggregated interpersonal trust in a group, or public trust in a risk management organization.

Table 2 reports the top five keywords, organized by the percentage of participants who selected them as a priority.

[Table 2 about here]

Top Five Priorities Overall. Below, we discuss each of the keywords in turn and, in hopes of spurring future research exploring these areas, highlight especially relevant work already published in *JTR*.

“Active trust management” was identified by just over one-half of the sample as an important area of development for the literature. In general, this work takes a process-based approach to the development and maintenance of trust and an evaluation of the titles and abstracts of articles already published in *JTR* highlights an article that directly took on the issue. Specifically, Grimpe (2019) leverages the global financial context to explore the concept as introduced by Möllering and colleagues (e.g., Child & Möllering, 2003).

The “Dark Side of Trust” was prioritized by one-half of the respondents. This concept is typically understood to refer to a set of damaging dynamics rooted in trust, especially when it exceeds the trustworthiness of the target or drives the trustor to behave in ways that cause excess harm (e.g., Skinner et al., 2014). This also mirrors discussions of credulous or misplaced trust in the political realm that arise when individuals are blind to the actions and performance of key actors, especially as a result of partisan biases (Norris, 2022). Although certainly not absent, relatively little published work at *JTR* directly addresses this keyword. Indeed, the most relevant piece explores the “dark side” of institutionalizing the field of trust research, rather than of trust itself (Perrone, 2013).

“Trust violation” was similarly identified as a priority by one-half of the sample and is somewhat better represented in our published work. The concept is generally understood to refer to a trustor’s experience of intentional or negligent harm in the context of an explicit or assumed trusting relationship. These dynamics have been most explicitly explored by Fulmer and Gelfand (2015) who consider how its impact may be moderated by culture. Trust violations also feature prominently in scholarship exploring commitment in gig work (Campagna & Griffith, 2023) and higher education (Graso et al., 2014).

“Artificial intelligence” was prioritized by a slightly smaller percentage of the sample but reflects an especially major growing area of contemporary trust research. As these technologies develop, there has been a consistent call for increased attention to the elements that foster trust, and more critically, that ensure trustworthiness. The current issue includes *JTR*’s first explicitly AI-focused publication in which Yamamoto and colleagues (2025) consider the development of trust in an organizational context. Other work, however, has explored the closely related question of trust in an automated decision-making tool (Calhoun et al., 2019).

“Trust building” was also prioritized by 41% of the sample and features prominently throughout *JTR*’s published work. As a particularly broad term, relevant work explores a variety of

processes, including active trust management itself, but other scholars have leveraged lenses like contracts (Järvinen & Branders, 2020), networks (Gausdal, 2012), macro (rather than solely micro) processes (Bachmann, 2011), and international relations (Hughes, 2024).

Top Five Priorities by Category. Further evaluation of the top five keywords within each category demonstrates the primacy of applications as a direction for the future of trust research (Table 3): All five of the most important priorities overall appear in the applications category. Considering the other categories, however, does highlight opportunities, especially for research exploring vulnerability (41%), using case studies as a methodology (36%), and centering interpersonal relationships (32%).

[Table 3 about here]

Regarding vulnerability, the concept appears regularly across published work both explicitly (Hamm et al., 2024; Ma, 2023; Shapira, 2019) and implicitly (e.g., Delhey et al., 2023; James, 2014; Mishra & Mishra, 2013) and is the central focus of an upcoming special issue. Case studies are similarly well-represented and have been used to explore trust in education (Ben-Malka et al., 2023; Karhapää & Savolainen, 2018; Kosonen et al., 2022), the public sector (Bentzen, 2019; Vallentin & Thygesen, 2017), emergency management (Roud & Gausdal, 2019), and other contexts (Hall & Symon, 2012; Hogberg et al., 2018). Our published work has also explored a variety of interpersonal trust issues, including trustor characteristics (Schepisi et al., 2023) and perceptions (Frederiksen, 2014; Tomlinson, 2011), trustee (Okubo et al., 2023) and dyadic considerations (Lu et al., 2017), and methodological concerns (Wollebaek et al., 2022) in a variety of contexts, but especially within organizations (Ferrin et al., 2018; Sondern & Hertel, 2024).

Implications for the Conversation of Trust Research

Our perusal of the *Journal of Trust Research's* previously published work and Editorial Community's expertise and perspectives offers a few potential insights into the future of trust research. This lens, while incomplete, paints the familiar picture of a particularly diverse scholarly field, but one with relatively strong roots in a much smaller set of perspectives. Despite consistent attention to blending these approaches, most trust research primarily considers the phenomenon as a fundamentally interpersonal (psychological) or societal (sociological) phenomenon. Thus, this remains a key distinction for the broad literature of trust and helps to explain persistent clefs between otherwise similar areas of work like public administration (which tends to center individuals) and political trust (which tends to favor aggregated perspectives).

Our evaluation also highlights a more contemporary diffusion of trust research into new and emerging areas like the media and artificial intelligence. Thus, while any given effort is likely to be rooted in a particular silo, trust researchers have been diligent in ensuring that their work is not bound by them. This integration is, in many ways, the primary goal of our journal and we look forward to continuing to foster it, especially by underscoring an emphasis on developing the

conceptual and theoretical infrastructure needed to support bridging these boundaries. To that end, we reiterate three key journal priorities that we presented in our team's first editorial (Hamm et al., 2024) to offer broad guidance to the trust research generally.

New Insights in a Specific Relationship or Relationship Type. If there has been one constant in trust research, it is that it continues to expand its sphere of influence. From close relationships to international relations, there are few social interactions that do not have clear implications for trust, and even (para-)social relationships with AI fall well within our scope. A key consideration for researchers looking for new areas to apply trust is the presence of vulnerability and control over it (Vanneste & Puranam, 2024). Thus, trust is most likely to be relevant when the focal individual recognizes some potential for injury and believes that something or someone has control over its likelihood or severity and when that assessment has real potential to influence the trustor. Contexts in which these key dynamics are theoretically distinct from better-studied areas are therefore especially important for advancing the field. For example, a key distinction between business organizations and public agencies is the traditionally less voluntary nature of the relationship: While we can typically discontinue relationships with private organizations, it is often much harder to eliminate our reliance on public governance. Public administration therefore offers a potentially important context to explore the implications of trust beyond exit behaviors. Similarly, AI offers an important new context because it challenges the clear agency of the trustee: The AI context has significant potential to help researchers evaluate the relative importance of a variety of trustor understandings of the trustee's ability to make independent decisions.

Conceptual and Theoretical Integration. While broadening trust research offers important opportunities to explore the breadth of the construct, its development as a coherent field of study requires integration. Thus, it is increasingly important that trust researchers be familiar with more than just their own pocket of scholarship (see also Dirks & de Jong, 2022). While our authors have been especially intentional in integrating distinct perspectives, there is real risk that *JTR*'s published work neglects historically significant and even currently vibrant approaches that may—at first—seem out of place. A recent exchange in *Sociologica* (Eyal et al., 2024a; 2024b; Esposito, 2024; Möllering, 2024) elucidates a perspective of trust that it explicitly places beyond our ostensible focus on “trust itself” which it conceptualizes as a “figment of the scholastic imagination” (Eyal et al., 2024a, p. 186). Thus, there remains work to be done in integrating new perspectives into our volumes—and, more importantly—into our collective understanding of trust. As a universal concept that cuts across most of the human experience, it is unlikely that any given perspective of trust will be sufficient. Trust is, and must be, many different things to many different people, and yet be integrated enough to permit coherence. We remain committed to creating the considerable space needed to collect diverging perspectives (Tomlinson et al., 2024) with the goal of allowing the strengths of one approach to address the limitations of another.

Decontextualized Trust. Following this idea of expanding the footprint of trust research to reflect the breadth of the construct, there is a need for work that “leave(s) behind the particulars of context to build a parsimonious and generalizable, cross-boundary science of trust” (Hamm et

al., 2024, p. 4). The ABI model of trustworthiness—and its approach to trust as a psychological state typified by a willingness to accept vulnerability (Mayer et al., 1995)—are a clearly influential example that likely still has a great deal to offer the field, but trust is necessarily much more. Trust is an intrapsychic experience, a dyadic process, a group-level phenomenon, and a social flow but it is not always clear how these perspectives integrate or when which approach is most explanatory. For example, the contemporary discussion of a loss of trust in the institutions of democracy necessarily implicates individual-level trust in “government” but is importantly connected to dyadic concepts like felt trust and relationship needs, as well as group dynamics like partisanship and flow-based concerns like the skillful oscillation of trusting reliance on others as best serves each passing moment. Thus, there is work yet to be done to provide the connective tissue needed to demonstrate when and how these seemingly competing explanations co-exist and their relative roles in fostering or preventing important outcomes.

The Current Issue

The first issue of our 15th volume advances the conversation of trust research through four articles and an invited commentary. In it, Yamamoto and colleagues (2025) take an organizational approach to understanding trust in AI in the workplace. In particular, they explore the evolution of trust based in calculation, cognition, and affect as well as their relationships with critical thinking. Ultimately, they find that each trust type predicts its subsequent form but that some of the relationships also hold reciprocally. Interestingly, however, only calculative trust predicts critical thinking. Vortuba and colleagues (2025) similarly focus on the organizational context to test the Perceived Influence Model which theorizes how trust develops in domains where the critical vulnerability is controlled by more than one trustee. They find evidence of not only additive effects, but also compensatory and compulsory effects, depending on the trustor’s perceived reliance on and the trustworthiness of the trustee. Schulz (2025) explores political trust through an analysis of the “rally around the flag” effect during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany. The author finds the expected strong relationship between increased perceptions of threat and political trust but that those who were more supportive of the containment measures tended to trust more and this “trust bonus” reduced over time. Rutar and colleagues (2025) study social trust and its impact on mental health for young people. They find evidence of the hypothesized link, especially for adolescent trust in close family members, but also demonstrate that it may be importantly moderated such that religiosity may serve as an important buffer in religious contexts. Finally, Schoorman and colleagues’ (2025) invited commentary expands the burgeoning conversation about vulnerability within trust research by offering a critical evaluation of an article published in the previous issue (Hamm et al., 2024). In it, they integrate their recently published work (Ballinger et al., 2024) to help elucidate the broad “conceptual space” of vulnerability, especially as it impacts the future of trust research.

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Figure 1. Percentage of Total Published Work by Type

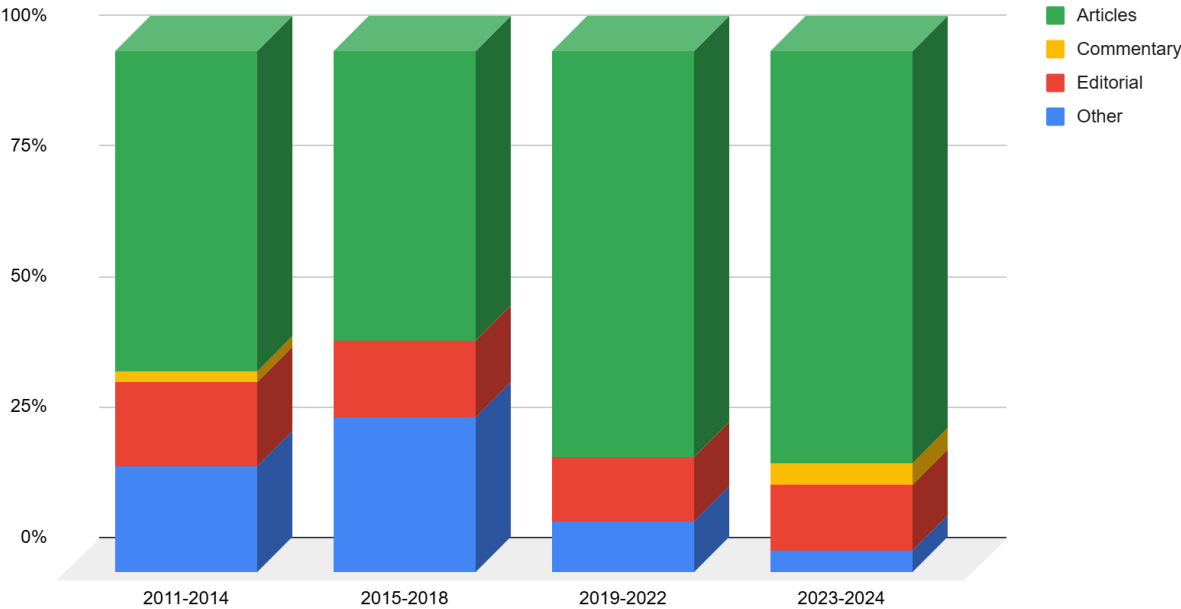


Figure 2. Percentage of Total Published Work by Key Trust Literature

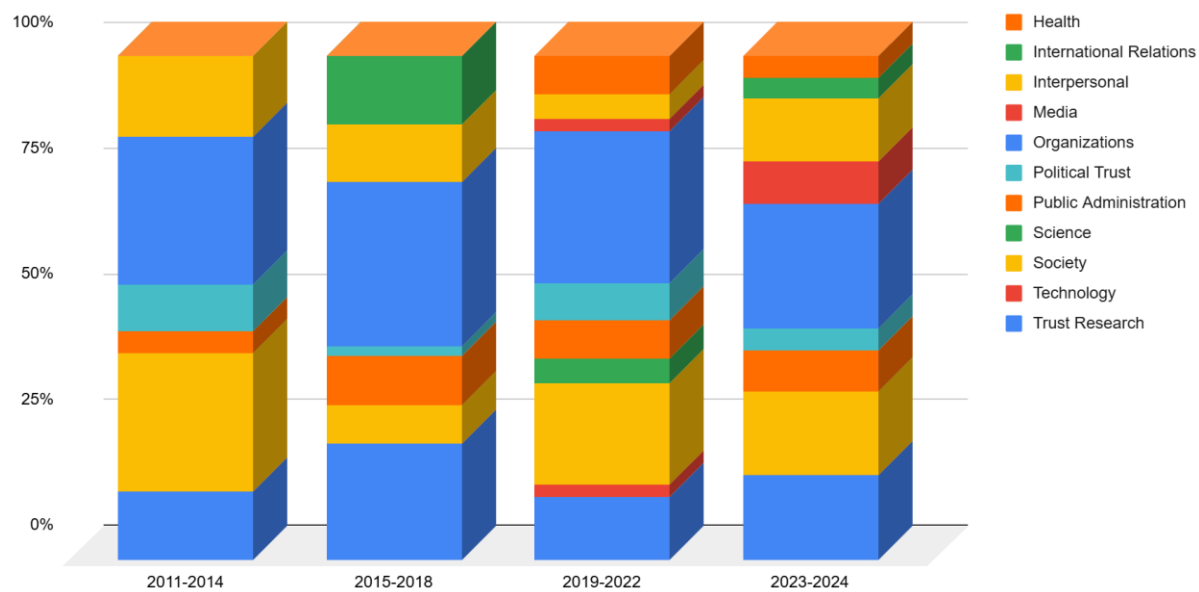


Figure 3. Percentage of Total Published Works by the Corresponding Author's First-Listed Affiliation

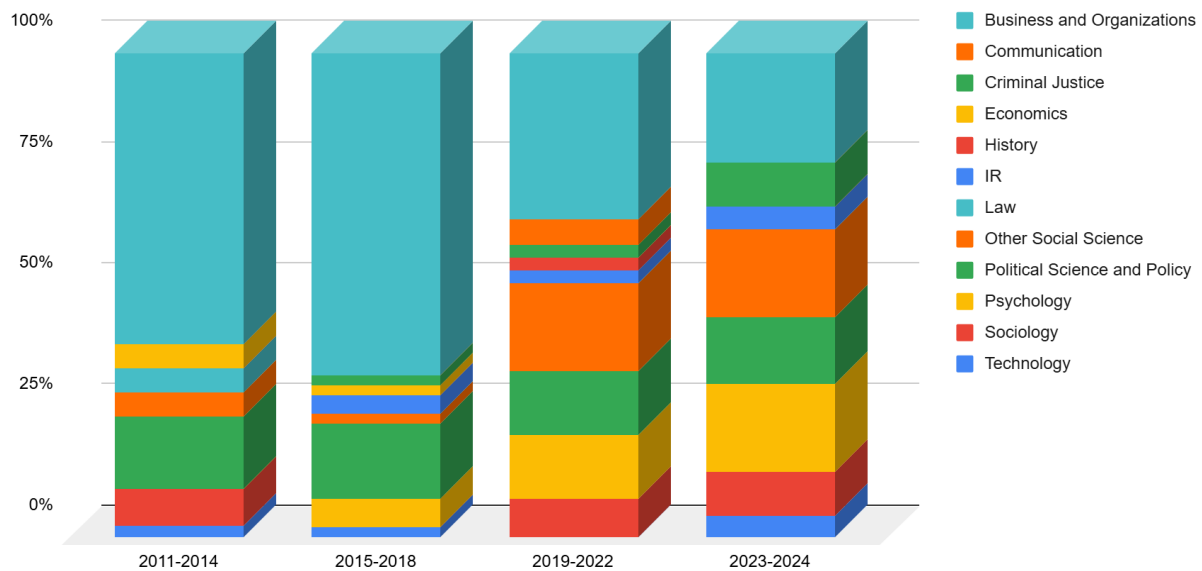


Table 1. Repeated Keywords (> 2) Over Time

2011-2014		2015-2018		2019-2022		2023-2024	
social****	6	trustworthiness***	6	social****	6	social****	6
trustworthiness***	4	theory**	6	distrust**	5	media	5
Interpersonal trust**	4	institutions/al**	8	trustworthiness***	5	distrust**	5
institutions/al**	9	management	5	public**	5	news	4
theory**	3	public**	5	power	3	Interpersonal trust**	3
knowledge	3	social****	5	systematic review	3	political**	3
government	3	multi-level	5	political**	3		
uncertainty	3	cooperation	4				
calculativeness	3	organizational	4				
		process	3				
		international	3				
		risk	3				
		food	3				

Note. *'s represent the number of times the keyword appears across periods.

Table 2. Top Five Most Prioritized Keywords Overall

Keyword	Category	Priority Percentage
Active Trust Management	Applications	55%
Dark Side of Trust	Applications	50%
Trust Violation	Applications	50%
Artificial Intelligence	Applications	41%
Trust Building	Applications	41%

Table 3. Top Five(+) Most Prioritized Keywords by Category

Category	Keyword	Priority Percentage
Applications	Active Trust Management	55%
	Dark Side of Trust	50%
	Trust Violation	50%
	Artificial Intelligence	41%
	Trust Building	41%
Approaches	Case Studies	36%
	Multilevel Trust	32%
	Cross-Cultural Trust	29%
	Theory	29%
	Networks	25%
	Qualitative Methods	25%
Constructs	Vulnerability	41%
	Distrust	36%
	Trustworthiness	29%
	Affect-Based Trust	25%
	Betrayal	25%
Contexts	Interpersonal Relationships	32%
	Top Management	29%
	Organizations	25%
	Business Networks	22%
	Technology	22%