

Grounded in Reality or Invented?
Lessons on Construct Ontology from Demonic Possession and Trust
By Heribert Gierl
Executive Summary

Purpose: This paper addresses the crisis of trustworthiness in behavioral marketing research caused by construct inflation. It argues that the discipline should cease to produce and validate constructs that lack a grounding in ontological reality. The paper proposes criteria to assess whether a construct represents a real-world phenomenon or an academic artifact.

Methodology: To identify unsuitable criteria for judging the reality-grounding of constructs, we used a dialectical time-travel scenario between a modern-day researcher and an Inquisitor of yore. To establish criteria that support the assumption of reality-grounding, we conduct a discussion centered on the construct of trust.

Findings: The analysis identifies ontological fallacies that lead researchers to mistake internal logical consistency and social-institutional consensus for evidence of the existence of particular constructs. The paper demonstrates that modern validation techniques (e.g., convergent and discriminant validity) are conditional: they only prove a scale's utility if the construct is reality-grounded but do not provide evidence for a construct's reality itself.

Originality: By shifting the focus from measurement to existence, this paper provides a diagnostic tool for researchers to distinguish between discovered human structures and invented academic artifacts.

Research Implications: The study proposes two criteria for reality-grounded research: strong language independence and strong theory independence of constructs. By insisting on these aspects, academics can ensure that the constructs they employ are not merely invented artifacts but represent the lived facts of the marketplace.

Implications for Practice: Practitioners listening to presentations by academics regarding customer-behavior constructs should ask researchers not only to explain the conceptualization of the constructs (definitions, clarifications) and how to measure them but also to provide detailed evidence that the constructs are grounded in reality. The demand for ontological accountability serves to prevent research conducted solely at the top of the ivory tower, where constructs often exist only to satisfy internal academic requirements rather than to describe actual consumer life.