

## Chapter 4

# The Role of Trust in Online Relationship Formation

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### ABSTRACT

*Trust plays a key role in the formation of any romantic relationship, but it is particularly salient to the formation of relationships online. In this chapter, the authors examine how trustworthiness, relational trust, general trust, and confidence in systems shape the experience of online dating. The authors propose that each of these trust-related phenomena becomes salient at different points in the process of finding a potential date, contacting him or her, meeting face-to-face, and beginning an offline relationship. Moreover, the authors suggest that the constraints and affordances of online interaction have the potential both to help and to hinder the assessment of trustworthiness and the development of relational trust.*

### INTRODUCTION

*“[Operation] Match feels that it has just scratched the surface in machine-age romance. Next step is a process called ‘RealTime’ that will allow a customer on any campus anywhere to fill in his questionnaire on a keyboard teletype (perhaps in the Student*

*Union?) hooked up to a central computer. Within minutes, the keyboard will automatically type out the names and telephone numbers of five soul mates within driving range. Instant Eros, it seems, will be here long before 1984.”*

— “My IBM Baby,” *Time Magazine*, November 1965

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In few areas of life do we entrust so much as with our romantic partners. To intertwine our emotional, financial, and familial future with another person requires a great deal of trust, given the high stakes of such a decision. Trust is a central component of many types of online relationships, but the development of intimate relationships through online dating and matchmaking services provides a unique window into the interplay of trust and related phenomena. Unlike many other types of online relationships, romantic relationships begun in computer-mediated environments are often expected to progress to face-to-face interaction. Researchers typically identify the point of the initial meeting as a clear risk, rife with various uncertainties (Green, 2007). However, we argue that there is much to gain from a wider view of the role of trust in activities that lead up to an in-person meeting and in subsequent interactions, as the relationship continues to develop.

In this chapter, we examine how four related phenomena — confidence in systems, trustworthiness, relational trust, and general trust — affect online relationship formation, in particular among people meeting through online dating systems. We begin by presenting a variety of theoretical perspectives on these phenomena, followed by an overview of interpersonal communication in computer-mediated communication environments in general and online dating systems in particular. Next, we consider the role of trust-related processes in online relationship formation: how computer-mediated self-presentation and interpersonal perception influence assessments of trustworthiness, how online communication affects the development of trust, and how people interacting through online dating systems seek to reduce uncertainty and build trust as they move toward meeting face-to-face. Finally, we suggest directions for future research that might deepen our understanding of trust in the context of computer-mediated relationship formation.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **The Concept of Trust**

Trust is an essential part of social interaction. As Trudy Govier (1997) argues, the benevolence and confidence that we associate with trust can act as a type of social glue, alleviating concerns of risk and uncertainty in interpersonal interaction. It is therefore unsurprising that trust is a central concept and the focus of research in diverse literatures such as psychology, sociology, social psychology, philosophy, computer science, communication, and economics. We begin by discussing four concepts that are essential for understanding trust and trust-like phenomena in online relationships: trustworthiness, relational trust, general trust, and confidence in systems. Since different literatures and research traditions speak more to some aspects of trust than to others, our goal is to highlight the key trust-related issues for online relationship formation from a range of theoretical and methodological approaches.

### **Uncertainty, Risk and Trustworthiness**

When individuals initially interact with one another in the presence of risk and uncertainty, each party makes assessments, implicitly or explicitly, about the trustworthiness of the other. Risk is what is at stake in a given interaction (such as money or time), while uncertainty refers to the ambiguity of an outcome (Cook et al., 2005). Both risk and uncertainty influence one's assessment of another's trustworthiness in a given context. For example, assessments of trustworthiness might not be essential in situations with uncertain outcomes if the stakes are low. On the other hand, assessing the trustworthiness of others might be critical even in situations with relatively certain outcomes if the stakes are high.

Trust and trustworthiness are distinct concepts — the former results from a process of

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