

Chapter 6

Impediments to and Affordances of Creating Trust over the Internet: The Case of Israeli Youth*

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ABSTRACT

In spite of obstacles to trust-building over the Internet, as well as continuous warnings on the part of educators, parents and social movements about the dangers of unsupervised web surfing by children and adolescents, an avid culture of youth has emerged over the Internet and created spaces for trust-building. This paper aims to display the key impediments encountered in the formation of trust relations over the Internet among youth, and the ways that these obstacles are engaged. Observations and conversations with Israeli adolescents yielded three intertwined impediments to online trust: (1) Lies and truths. (2) Anonymity/Disclosure (3) Transparency/Opacity. Uncovering the ways that youth create and maintain trust may illuminate our understanding of how youth communicate and fraternize in today's Information and Communication Technology society. Basing itself on these findings, this study contributes to the understanding of challenges and bridges for instilling social integration through computer-mediated-communication (CMC).

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has been lauded for its ability to foster interaction among innumerable individuals. However, this interaction among strangers has been accompanied by apprehension and uneasiness. This concern has been magnified in the case of children and youth, who are often considered susceptible to

adult harassment and are viewed as requiring adult and state protection.

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In sociological literature, trust¹ has been perceived as a major building block of social solidarity

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and society's various productions. Furthermore, trust has been seen as a precondition for securing economic relations and for coping with conflict (Durkheim, 1949; Barber, 1983; Gambetta, 1988; Sztompka, 1999). Trust may be defined as "confidence in the reliability of a person or system" (Giddens, 1990). Among scholars, social trust has been linked to a number of positive outcomes. For example, trust has been linked to social solidarity and cohesion, to strong economic performance (Yamagishi and Yamagishi, 1994; Fukuyama, 1995) and is viewed as a source of support for democratic ideals (Muller and Seligson, 1994; Cleary and Stokes, 2006). In theories of social capital, social trust is both an outcome and a cause of high levels of civic involvement (Putnam, 2000; Kelly, 2008) and also curbs non-normative behavior.

Early studies of the Internet expressed disbelief in the possibility of creating and maintaining interpersonal and collective trust due to the inhuman lack of face to face interaction (Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire, 1984; Beninger, 1987; Heim, 1992; Stoll, 1995). Later on, with the rise of the Internet and the intense activity it engendered, social scientists and intellectuals noted the rise of online trust, occasionally as a surprising finding, and measured the outcomes of these ties in the exchange of individual goods, production of public goods, the existence of stable social networks, online community building, and the formation of social norms over the net (see Silverstone, 1999; Parks and Floyd, 1996; Kollok and Smith, 1999; Baym, 2000; Raymond, 2001; Dutton and Shepherd, 2006). Researchers also delineated the paradoxical emergence of trust within online cultures that foster deviant behavior (e.g. mass infringements on copyrights, plagiarism), and is best illustrated in the case of Hackers (Taylor, 1999). These studies contributed to an understanding of the new forms and dynamics of trust over the Internet, but were less concerned with the ways trust is created among specific social sub-groups, cultures and social categories. In this study, I aim to focus on the generation of trust among youth.

BACKGROUND

Youth serve as an important case study for observing online trust for the use of new technologies is prevalent among adolescents. Surveys and social indicators point not only to the extensive involvement of youth in Internet and technological activities, but also to a high degree of expertise manifested in the use of these technologies. Rather than limit them to specific areas, schools or community centers for example, youth integrate these activities into the overall matrix of their daily lives (Rideout et.al., 2005; Thurlow and McKay, 2003; Livingstone, 2002; Johnsson-Smargdi, 2001; Holloway and Valentine, 2003; Hecht, 2001). Furthermore, the question of trust formation is viewed as particularly important for young people's integration into society and their outreach beyond the confines of the family (Jarrett, Sullivan and Watkins, 2005; Eisenstadt, 1974).

As the Internet has rapidly become an integral part of youth's everyday lives and is an important venue for adolescents to socialize with their peers, this paper aims to examine the formation of trust in a social arena that is very different than more documented venues of socialization and fraternization among youth (e.g. schools, youth movements, dance clubs). Among more traditional settings, trust relations are based on a direct, face-to-face interaction, as well as being embedded in communal social networks (in the neighborhood, school etc). These features are absent in computer-mediated-relations and raise questions regarding the ability and ways for creating trust over the Internet given the Internet's own social and technological affordances and challenges (on this comparison in a controlled environment see Wilson, Straus and McEvily, 2006). More specifically, I ask what are the impediments identified by youth for online trust and how do they confront these obstructions?

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