

Adolescents and trust in online social interactions *

A qualitative exploratory study

The SNs have become increasingly embedded in adolescents' daily life and their use has led to both benefits and risks concerning their potential impact on online interpersonal relationships. Moreover, studies suggest that adolescents perceive more benefits associated with extending online interpersonal networks than the potential costs that can derive from. Underlying this "interpersonal calculation", the online interpersonal trust could play a crucial role influencing the adolescent's choice to self-disclose, avowing possible concerns about privacy issues. However, it is still unclear how online trust can be conceptualized and those elements the sense of trust in online interactions is based on. Adopting the theory of the socio-cognitive model proposed by Castelfranchi and Falcone (2010), the present study attests that on-line trust is also a multi-component construct and that the attribution of factors, such as capacity/competence and disposition/availability, can do the difference in understanding the online interpersonal dynamics in adolescence.

Keywords: Trust, SN, Adolescents, interpersonal relationship, qualitative study

In the last decade, SNs have become increasingly embedded in adolescents' daily life. Their use has led to both benefits and risks concerning their potential impact on online interpersonal relationships. Adolescents are indeed engaged in those online social activities that are important to them: friendships and interactions between peers (Gross, 2004). These important motivations push young people to interact online not only to maintain but also to extend their network of interpersonal relationships (Subrahmanyan & Greenfield, 2008). In this regard, recent literature has highlighted the potential risks for adolescents associated with self-disclosure (Taddei, Bastianina & Cont, 2013). Although teens can be aware of the potential risks resulting from the uncertain online relationship, at the same time they consider them necessary to establish new reciprocal exchanges in online contexts. A detailed self-presentation indeed allows them to reduce the uncertainty of online relationships (Tidwell and Walther, 2002) and to legitimize a person's access to a new group of online friends (Galegher, Sproull, & Kiesler, 1998). For adolescents, the benefits associated with the new opportunities for interpersonal exploration that the web offers would outweigh the potential costs that can derive from it. Underlying this "interpersonal calculation", the online interpersonal trust could play a crucial role (Coli et al., 2019). Some scholars have suggested that online trust directly influences the choice to disclose private information important to one's self (Fogel & Nehmad, 2009; Frye & Dornisch, 2010) and could moderate possible concerns about privacy issues (Olivero and Lunt, 2004). Although these studies highlight the significant role of online interpersonal trust, it is still unclear how online trust can be conceptualized and those elements the sense of trust in online interactions is based on. To fill this gap this study aims to examine the meaning of online trust for today's teenagers and its possible ingredients. In particular, by adopting the socio-cognitive theory for trust proposed by Falcone & Castelfranchi (2001; Castelfranchi & Falcone, 2010) – which consider trust as a

complex mental attitude based on different mental ingredients, two of which are mainly: trustor's goals and beliefs (the main of whom are *competence* and *willingness* attributed by the trustor to the trustee) – we hypothesized that online trust is also a multi-component construct and that the attribution to others of factors, such as competence and willingness, can make the difference in the understanding online interpersonal dynamics in adolescence.

Method

Participants. The study involved 10 adolescents, five males, and five females, aged 12 to 18 ($M = 15.5$). The participants were recruited with a non-probabilistic cascade sampling, in Italy.

Design. The data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews (average duration 30 minutes), administered between December 2019 and January 2020, aimed at exploring the conceptualization of trust, with particular attention to its cognitive ingredients, i.e. competence, and willingness. The interviews were audio-recorded (upon participants' and their parents' informed consent) and subsequently transcribed faithfully.

Analysis. An inductive content analysis – carried out in parallel by the researchers to ensure the accuracy of the analysis work – was performed on the textual material using NVivo10 software (QSR International, 2012) and following the procedure described by Elo & Kyngäs (2008).

Results

What is trust

Trust is described as a relationship characterized by reciprocity, secrecy, and authenticity. Furthermore, trust is promoted by the knowledge that is established with a person over time, and by the SN in which the relationship itself takes place (see Tab. 1).

Table 1. *The conceptualization of trust*

Main Categories (n. Sources/References)	Subcategories (n. Sources/ References)
Relationships (8/8)	Reciprocity (4/4) Secrecy (3/3) Authenticity (1/1)
Dynamics (6/6)	Person (4/4) Time (1/1) Type of SN (1/1)

The competence beliefs

The competencies are related to the ability to manage both the modality and the content of communication, but also relationships, interacting in a respectful manner of the other; constructively use the SNs, for example, to encourage knowledge improvement and promote interpersonal relationships; manage the online self-presentation, both in terms of the richness and originality of the elements provided; have a critical spirit, knowing for example how to manage the social influence dynamics. Basic technical skills, relating for example to the use of applications connected to SNs, are also required (see Tab. 2).

Table 2. *The competence beliefs*

Main Categories (n. Sources/References)	Subcategories (n. Sources/ References)
Social norms (4/15)	Communication (4/10) Interaction (3/5)
Instrumental (4/6)	Knowledge (2/2) Relationships (2/2) Utility (1/1)
Self-presentation (2/4)	Self-image (2/3) Interaction modality (1/1)
Critical ability (1/8)	Authenticity (1/4) Social influence (1/3) Maturity (1/1)
Technical (1/1)	SN use (1/1)

The willingness beliefs

An indicator of the willingness is the presence of the other, inferred from an immediate and frequent interaction, but also from a closeness made up of openness, interest, and propensity to help. The communication also contains a series of indicators of willingness; in particular, this should respectfully take place, without invading others' private sphere, and be based on useful content. Willingness also means being reliable, that is authentic, consistent, and honest (Table 3).

Table 3. *The willingness beliefs*

Main Categories (n. Sources/References)	Subcategories (n. Sources/ References)
Presence (9/25)	Interaction (7/17) Proximity (6/8)
Communication (4/4)	Modality (2/2) Content (2/2)
Reliability (2/3)	Authenticity (1/1) Consistency (1/1) Honesty (1/1)

Discussion

This study provides the adolescent's conceptualization of online trust, highlighting that it is a relational and reciprocal construct, multidimensional and dynamic. It changes based on the person with whom we interact and the context, i.e. the type of SN, in which the relationship takes place. Both competence and willingness are two ingredients of great importance for the attribution of trust. Concerning competence, the skills related to communication management - both in terms of content and terms of form - prevail. About willingness, a series of clues relating to the presence of the other - such as comments and responses to photos, stories, and polls, but also simple likes - prevail. Knowing these elements, even more so in a virtual environment where face-to-face communication is lacking, can be particularly useful for understanding online interpersonal dynamics in adolescence, and being able to plan interventions aimed at preventing the risks to which daily, in trusting the others, adolescents are exposed. Future studies could provide a broader picture of the trust components, also concerning other dimensions, such as risky online behavior.

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