# Adolescents and Trust in Online Social Interactions

Social media have become increasingly embedded in adolescents' daily lives. Adolescents seem to be aware of online trust value in "selecting" peers to be trusted. To protect themselves from the risks they are exposed to, they choose to interact with peers/friends who are already known in real life or are similar to them in terms of interests, ways of thinking, passions, and age. Additionally, others' competencies and willingness play an important role in adolescents' evaluations and decisions to rely on others online.

## 1. Introduction

Trust is a key element in the formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships and human interaction [1][2]. It reflects the outcome of internal mental processes [3] encompassing both cognitive and social aspects such as representations of the other involved in the interaction in terms of competence, dependence [4] as well as common membership in and affiliation to a salient social group [5].

During adolescence, trust has been attested as an important dimension related to the management of adolescents' online opportunities and risks [6][7][8][9]. However, despite the fact that its role in understanding online dynamics is already recognized, how trust in online relationships is built among adolescents is still an unexplored issue. Understanding the antecedents of online interpersonal trust is important in light of the relationships of the new digital generations, as these relationships are often born and/or developed in online contexts. Social media, such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, have greatly transformed the structures and relationships of adolescents [10][11] and have become increasingly embedded in adolescents' daily lives [12][13]. Although the literature on social media and adolescence is extensive [14][15], in light of the current knowledge, there is a complete lack of research on the social and cognitive elements that lead adolescents to trust others online.

## 2. Adolescents and Social Media Use: Reasons and Behavior

Nowadays, social media are the actual social labs of the new digital generations. The literature on adolescents and social media is extensive. The studies published in recent years mainly concern adolescents' use, particularly reasons and behaviors in interactions on social media.

Concerning reasons, it is well-documented that young people are generally connected to satisfy their typical needs, such as the desire to interact with peers. Online adolescents share their thoughts and moods with close friends [16], and at the same time, social media facilitates the emergence of new relationships [17]. Another reason for adolescents' social media use is the construction of their personal identity [18]. Indeed, social media allow adolescents to experiment with their own identities, identifying with a group or friend based on specific characteristics or common interests [19]. Moreover, social media provide the opportunity to construct an image for oneself by publishing and selecting certain information [20].

Regarding interaction modalities, while a part of the literature has focused on anti-normative behaviors, another part has focused on the constructive use of social media. The first group of studies showed that the time adolescents spend on social media and the problematic use can encourage online aggressive behaviors such as cyberbullying, hate speech, and online racism [21][22]. Cyberbullying can, in turn, have negative well-being outcomes for victims and perpetrators, including damaged relationships and heightened psychological distress [23]. Furthermore, experiencing cyberbullying victimization is a significant risk factor for suicidal behavior [24]. The second group of studies showed that constructive use of social media, for example, by adopting prosocial or supportive behaviors, promotes social inclusion and adolescents' well-being [15]. Moreover, the active use of social media affects perceived social support, which in turn has a positive influence on the depressive moods of adolescents [25].

## 3. Online Interpersonal Trust and Adolescents

Trust plays a central role in face-to-face interactions as well as online ones. In particular, trust was identified as an element that can guarantee the success of these interactions [26], as well as the precursor of active engagement in online environments [27]. As regards the definition of online trust, Beldad, De Jong, and Steehouder [28] pointed out that the classic trust definitions can be applied to trust in online relationships as well. Therefore, online trust and face-to-face trust would seem to be based on the same fundamental components.

As underlined by Koranteng et al. [29], although offline trust definitions are applicable in online settings, the situational elements that influence the formation of trust differ. For instance, exchange appears to be a common factor in both settings, but exchanges in offline environments are different from online settings [11]. Issues regarding physical distance are also different in these environments, and in particular, social media eliminates the geographical boundaries [10]. In addition, human network attributes such as non-verbal language on which trust is built in traditional environments are absent on social media. Thus, the lack of elements relating to face-to-face relationships reduces the richness of communication among members [30].

Regarding online trust in adolescence, the most recent studies, conducted with quantitative methodologies, have focused on the relationship between trust and certain behaviors that take place in virtual environments [31]. In particular, online interpersonal trust seems to play an important role in understanding adolescents' use of social media, including problematic use, for example, smartphone use [8] and social media addiction [32].

Concerning the studies conducted with qualitative methodologies, while those involving the adult population are quite numerous [33][34][35], those focused on online trust in adolescence seem to be almost absent in the last five years. One of these is Gibson and Trnka's study [36], which explored young people's use of social media to give and receive support in informal peer networks and underlined the importance that young people give to trusting relationships as a prerequisite for engagement with online support.

With reference to the specific context of social media, the most recent studies were conducted on adults and focused on the relationship between specific forms of trust—that is, social trust, particularized trust, and institutional trust—and participation in online networks [37]. Others were aimed at understanding how social ties are linked to an economic measure of trust [38]. An interesting study is that of Koranteng et al. [29], which, using a sample of university students, proposed a model investigating the factors that promote trust among social media users. Results suggest that the Norm of Reciprocity, Social Interaction Ties, and Identification are significant factors that encourage trust among social media users. However, this is a quantitative study that, while identifying the determinants of trust, does not investigate the meaning they assume for the participants in the study itself.

As shown here, despite the increasing dissemination of studies on online trust, how trust is attributed in online environments, with a particular focus on social media and adolescence, is still unknown. This research, therefore, seeks to expand the current literature on adolescents' relationships with social media and trust, introducing a qualitative analysis methodology that appears to be absent in the study of online interpersonal trust in young people. It adopts the socio-cognitive model of trust, already successfully applied in order to measure different kinds of trust to investigate the factors that promote the formation of trust among adolescents interacting in social media. Furthermore, in the complex online scenario, the understanding of online trust could provide a more comprehensive lens in order to capture the evolution of different social behaviors and interpersonal dynamics and understand how they can move together toward adaptive or maladaptive paths.

## 4. The Socio-Cognitive Model of Trust

The concept of trust is central to this research, and in particular, the researchers intend to explore the elements that contribute to the establishment of trusting relationships in the context of online interactions between adolescents. To achieve this, the researchers used the socio-cognitive model of trust as a guide [3][39]. According to this model, trust is a relational construct that involves a trustor (X), that is the one who must trust someone else to carry out a certain task, and a trustee (Y), that is the subject on which trust is posed (with respect to that, more or less specialized or generic, task). When a relationship of trust is established, the trustor entrusts the trustee with that task, which necessarily will imply actions by the trustee in an attempt to obtain the expected result. The relationship of trust promoted by the trustor is aimed at achieving a goal, namely the one that led to the definition of the relationship of trust itself. The trustee's actions will take place in a given context, an environment that will certainly influence the actions themselves.

In particular, trust is based on two fundamental mental ingredients, namely goals (that is, the mental representation that identifies the desired state) and beliefs, the most important of which are competence and willingness attributed to the trustee. When the trustor delegates a task to the trustee, he/she must believe that the same is capable of doing things that he/she needs and that he/she has skills (competence belief). The trustor must also believe that the trustee intends to perform the task and that he/she will perform it (willingness belief). Therefore, the first belief refers to the possession of skills, competencies, and support tools to reach a goal, while the second refers to the possession of the attitudes of activation towards the task, which is intentionality, disposition, and motivation. Adding to these, there are other relevant beliefs, including the unharmfulness belief, which refers to the possibility that, voluntarily or involuntarily, the subject may damage the achievement of the goal; the dependence belief, which refers to the possibility of being able to reach the goal more or less autonomously; and on the trustor's other experiences belief of trust in the context, relative to how much the context is able to positively or negatively interfere with the achievement of the goal. Any action of trust implies a bet and, therefore, a risk. The trustor, in fact, with his/her act of trust, makes him/herself dependent on the trustee and in some way exposes him/herself, becoming vulnerable to the trustee's actions. In fact, there is a risk that the goal is not achieved, resulting in its failure and generating waste of material and not material resources.

The socio-cognitive model considers trust as an intrinsically dynamic phenomenon, which changes over time based on the changes that occur in the sub-components on which trust is based. In particular, it is a dynamic phenomenon depending on the trustor's previous experiences of trust (with the same or with other agents, on specific or not specific tasks, in some environments rather than in other environments). Trust also changes when the other sources on which it is based change (for example, people's way of thinking or the reputation of the trustee with whom they interact).

This model has the advantage of having identified a conceptual core capable of taking into account the most relevant processes that may lead to trust in the other person. Furthermore, it has operationalized the construct of trust by identifying the components on which it is based and the process, which, starting from an evaluation and going through a decision, leads to the actual act of trust. Initially applied in agent simulations [40], it has recently found wide application in the social sciences guiding the construction of scales aimed at studying trust in institutions [41] and in the doctor-patient relationship [42]. It has also been applied to the preliminary measure of adolescents' online/offline interpersonal trust [43].

Precisely because of its characteristics, this model could lend itself very well to an in-depth study of trust, guiding the exploration of the ingredients that contribute to the attribution of trust in the context of adolescents' online interactions. Knowing the point of view of young people concerning the beliefs theorized in the socio-cognitive model could prove particularly useful in order to fill the lack of studies in this area and to provide guidance to those who work with adolescents, for example, suggesting which elements should be considered in order to promote safe online behaviors.

# 5. Conclusion

Overall, the present research provides a detailed photograph of how trust in online relationships between adolescents can be configured, guiding the comprehension of the ingredients that contribute to the attribution of trust in online environments. In this sense, this research represents an attempt to fill the lack of qualitative studies on online interpersonal trust in young people. The usefulness of this research rests on its theoretical basis as well as on its application aspects.

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