

# Teenagers and Chatroom Relationships: Trust Building & Maintenance (Draft Proposal)

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## 1. Introduction

Many adolescents today cannot remember a time when the Internet was not a part of their world: at school or at home, for homework or for recreation. One part of that world includes synchronous on-line discussions, popularly known as Chatrooms. A search for “teen chatrooms” (Google, October 19, 2000), found 6,050 appropriate sites that identified themselves as being primarily or exclusively for adolescents. These sites range from general chat to specific topics such as eating disorders, religion, music, fashion, and celebrities.

These sites allow teens to meet, become friends, seek information or receive reassurance, and even begin “on-line dating”. However, the study of adolescents in chatroom environments is lacking.

## 2. Statement of the Problem

Rosson (1999), in her study of 133 stories of Web use contributed by users over a 40 months, points out that while the use of the WWW has expanded enormously over recent years we still know very little about what users wish to accomplish in this new medium. Even less is known about the goals and activities of adolescents on the WWW.

Adolescents express themselves and meet new people at Chatropolis <http://www.chatropolis.com>, a major Internet chatroom site. Chatropolis is a frames based chatroom interface, which supports GMUKS (graphical multi-user konversations) (Suler, 1999). GMUKS create a unique graphical social environment, rather than being purely text-based as Donath, Karahalios, Viégas (1999) discuss in their review of the design of graphical interfaces. People are able to express their identity visually through graphics and movie clips, as well as with the written word. The multimedia characteristics add a visual dimension that allows users to create the illusion of movement, space, and individuality. The result is a whole new realm for self-expression and social interaction with subtleties and complexities not seen in text-only chatrooms (Suler, 1999). In Chatropolis, GMUKS technology is manifested by the optional use of multi-media avatars<sup>1</sup> and HTML postings<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Multi-media avatars allow users to express their personalities through pictures using standard jpg/gif format or through animated gif files. Teen avatars are often pictures of

The GMUKS interface resembles a purely text-based chatroom in that participant's type messages that are displayed sequentially on the screen. The Chatropolis interface allows text and graphical messages to be posted "publicly", visible to all the users in the specific chatroom, or "privately", visible only to the sender and the receiver of the message. Inter-room messaging is also available.

In this environment adolescents meet and talk about their lives, their personal problems, their activities, or nothing in particular. In this way Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) mirrors real life face-to-face (FtF) dialogue. Many of its CMC's unique qualities revolve around the fact that it is an austere mode of communication. There are no changes in voice, no facial expressions, no body language, no (or very little) visual spatial environment as a context of meaning (Suler, 1997).

In her study surveying research on cross-turn coherence in CMC, Herring (1999) comments:

The lack of simultaneous feedback is a consequence of two separate features of CMC systems. First, text-only CMC is a "lean" medium which relies on fewer channels than face-to-face interaction for transmission of the message. Users do not see or hear their interlocutors and thus do not have access to non-verbal information about how others are responding (p. 3).

While the most common use of the GMUKS interface at Chatropolis – avatars - adds some additional visual clues, they are more analogues to the clues a user receives from the chat nickname (nic) a fellow chatroom user's choice than to actual visual cues received during a FtF exchange.

Theorists have suggested, "minimal, text-based CMC interaction is quite capable, and in some cases likely, to foster exceedingly intimate and affectionate communication, to levels greater than those common in parallel offline FtF interaction" (Walther, 1999, p. 4). In text-based communication, users selectively present themselves, concentrating on purposeful message construction and eliminating involuntary nonverbal clues from interaction. This interplay can magnify their sense of the similarity and desirability of others, while they become more friendly and attractive to other users (Walther, 1999). Rafaeli & Sudweeks (1997), in their study of message threading found that content on the net is less confrontational than is popularly believed, and observes "CMC is an experiment in social integration and democratic participation. By some measure at least, the experiment works. People want to join, and when they do, many stay" (p. 2).

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popular musicians, movie stars, or film clips as well as complex animated gif pictures created by the teens themselves.

<sup>2</sup> HTML allows users to express their personal style by changing font styles, sizes, and colors.

In making the decision to join CMC communities, participants must build trust in the CMC environment and in other users. Rotter (1967, 1971, 1980) conceived trust as a generalized expectation. Rotter states that individuals tend to generalize their experiences of whether promises are kept or not in their attitude toward others. Thus for Rotter trust is the expectation that one can depend upon communications made by others.

Luhmann (1979) conceives trust as a personal 'process' where there must be reciprocal approaches. These approaches must not appear to be calculated. There must be an opportunity for betrayal of trust, which may not be taken advantage of. Further familiarity is essential. Finally a certain degree of unpredictability in situations promotes trust formation...trust does not develop in risk-free relationships.

Reid (1991), in an ethnographic study, discusses the underlying assumption that physical contact is necessarily a part of human communication. This is understandable. The methods by which such groups are usually held together rely on physical proximity. These methods are not open to users of CMC, where text-based communication challenges and deconstructs these social tools. Jarvenpaa & Leidner (1998), in their review of a series of descriptive case studies on global virtual teams, found that work teams developed a "swift trust" that appeared to be fragile and transitory. Therefore in CMC environment users devoid of visual and auditory cues may develop "swift trust" in other participants.

To date CMC research has concentrated on online communities primarily populated by adults; Cherny (1999) college students or adults multi-tasking on the job, Hyman et al. (1994) Usenet groups likely to be populated by adult women such as alt.feminism & soc.women, Soukup (1999) in an ethnographic study of a "female-based chatroom" and a sports-chatroom – while either room may have had adolescent users neither catered primarily to that age group, Paolillo (1999) content analysis of Usenet channel #India – again some adolescent users may have been present, and Reid (1991) users likely to be "members of an academic community, often students of computer science" (p. 3). Research on adolescents in this medium is severely lacking. If we are to understand how the Internet shapes their lives, and have sufficient background to foretell what their impact on the World Wide Web (WWW) is likely to be, it is essential that we seek an understanding of how teens make and maintain Internet relationships. This study aims to begin to fill this research void.

### **3. Specific Research Questions**

Underlying assumptions:

1. I expect that adolescents in Chatropolis build trust in other users. However the definition of trust in the physical world tends to be somewhat individual, yet generalizable (Stack, 1978). I expect individual Chatropolis users definitions, of trust in cyberspace, to be generalizable as well.

2. I expect that these individualized, yet generalizable, definitions of trust are used by the teens in analyzing their interactions at Chatropolis. They then use this trust analysis in deciding how much personal information, and what levels of on-line and off-line contact should be initiated (Stack, 1978).
3. I expect that trust can be a fragile thing (Jarvenpaa et al., 1998).

Based on these underlying assumptions this study will investigate the following question:

- Q1: How do teens in Chatropolis define trust?
- Q2: How do teens in Chatropolis develop trust?
- Q3: What behaviors facilitate building trust?
- Q4: What behaviors undermine trust?

## **4. Literature Review**

### **4.1. Computer-Mediated Communication**

Kraut, Mukopadhyay, Szczypula, Kielser, & Scherlis (1998) state that interpersonal communication is the number one home use of the Internet. “The Internet is a community of chronic communicators” (Strangelove, 1994, p. 2). CMC allows opportunities to communicate with other people at will. An impulse that seems to be inherently human yet may be more easily enacted via technology (Walther, 1996).

McKenna (1999) related communicating with another person on the Internet to being in a darkened room in that you cannot see the other person, nor can they see you. Text relationships are not unique to cyberspace.

Writers have connected with readers for, as long as there have been books. Letters have supplemented FtF relationships since the birth of the alphabet (Soukup, 1978). Pen pal relationships have been known to last for many years, and some for a lifetime, without FtF contact. Though the sense of the other communication partner is not as strong because of the long delays between communication events (Sudweeks & Simoff, 1999). However the Internet has made text relationships so much easier and efficient, elevating them to a daily activity (Soukup, 1978).

Suler (2000) postulates that some people possess a special type of interpersonal empathy that allows them to detect the meaning and mood expressed of text communication. They may even hear the other person’s “voice” inside their head while reading text messages. Text relationships allow the unique perspective of being both a participant and an observer while seeing yourself on the screen.

By virtue of the individual separateness of Internet communication, CMC limits the kinds of communication cues available to participants. Text-based CMC lacks visual cues,

which facilitate users' cognitive and behavioral efforts to develop the other person in their minds (Walther, 1996; Walther, 1999; Walther, 1999). Nissenbaum (1999):

We are separated from others in time and space; we lack cues that may give evidence of similarity, familiarity, or shared value systems. We may not know that other's gender (male, female, or other), age, race, socioeconomic status, occupation, mode of dress geographic origins, nor some of the bodily signals that serve as cues in interactions where others are physically proximate (p. 6).

However Walther (1999) explored the utility of visual images in CMC and has found no consistent support for the material benefits of that channel though users' consistently highly rate its desirability. "This discrepancy suggests that, in the truest sense of the word, visual cues in CMC are 'overrated'" (p. 2).

Even without visual cues, McKenna & Bragh (1999) survey of 600 randomly selected participants in electronic newsgroups found that 79% of respondents, by far the greatest percentage, considered the relationships they had formed on the Internet to be as close, and as real as the relationships they maintained in the off-line world. Lacking FtF cues, text communication can be limited, ambiguous and an easy target for misunderstanding and projection. Without the distraction of FtF cues, text relationships enable people to connect more directly to the other's psyche (Suler, 2000).

Walther & Anderson (1994), in their meta-analysis of social and anti-social communication, found that asynchronous CMC was rated higher on all dimensions of relational intimacy - immediacy/affection, similarity/depth, and receptivity/trust. His 1999 study found that CMC groups were actually more socially oriented than FtF groups (Walther, 1999).

The more frequent the communication, the more relations maintained, the more socially supportive the relations (Haythornthwaite, 2000). In Baker's (1998) study of Internet couples, content analysis of questionnaires found some respondents replied positively that they might have revealed more in writing than in FtF. They found that men in particular might have an easier time revealing thoughts and feels through self-disclosure in writing. The relative anonymity of Internet communication, asynchronous and synchronous, allows more intimate details and they may share these details much sooner in CMC environments than they would with someone they met in a more traditional, non-anonymous setting (McKenna et al., 1999). Parks & Floyd (1995) and McKenna et al. (1999) both found that respondents generally reported engaging in relatively high levels of self-disclosure with Internet friends. Additionally, respondents reported that the disclosure they made to Internet friends were more emotional and personally intimate than factual.

#### **4.2. Teenagers/Adolescents in CMC**

But do these connections hold true for adolescence as well as for adults? Gilbert (1970) defines adolescence as the transitional time between puberty and early adulthood. Actual age limits cannot be pinpointed exactly because pubescent onset varies with the individual.

The teenage years are fraught with questions: Who am I? What kind of person do I want to be? What do I want to do with my life? What kind of relationships do I want? The Internet offers opportunities for adolescents to satisfy that need to express, explore, and experiment with their identities (Suler, 1998).

Adolescents explore their identities. They experiment intensely with new intimate relationships. They look for groups where they can feel a sense of belonging. The Internet offers an almost limitless array of people and groups to explore - all kinds of people and groups with all kinds of personalities, backgrounds, values, and interests (Suler, 1998).

It is the relationship that is the important thing, and not the communication medium. Once these relationships are created they are sustained and deepened via communication through email, telephone, and fax. The lower bandwidth<sup>3</sup> of email may be sufficient to maintain strong ties between persons who know each other well (Wellman & Gulia, 1996).

### **4.3. Trust**

Building strong ties between people requires the development of interpersonal trust between the partners. Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna (1985), in their survey of 47 couples who volunteered for the study, sets trust as one of the most desired qualities in any close relationship. It is often mentioned in conjunction with love and commitment as a cornerstone of the ideal relationship. "Trust is an attitude without guarantees, without a complete warrant" (Nissenbaum, 1999, p. 9).

First of all there has to be some cause for displaying trust. There has to be defined some situation in which the person trusting is dependent on their partner; otherwise the problem does not arise. Their behavior must then commit them to this situation and make them run the risk of trust being betrayed. In other words they must invest in what we called earlier a risky investment. (Luhmann, 1979)

Trust has been variously defined as the ability to count on one's partner and the partner's considerateness (Deutsch, 1973). Larzelere and Huston (1980) defined trust as the extent to which a person believes the other to be honest and genuinely interested in a partner's welfare. Driscoll, Davis, and Lipetz (1972) define trust as evolving through mutually satisfying interactions and increasing confidence in the relationship. Pettit (1995, p. 2) states, "To be loyal or virtuous or even prudent is, in obvious sense of the term, is to be trustworthy. It is to be reliable under trust and to be reliable in particular, because of possessing a desirable trait."

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<sup>3</sup> Walther (1999) defines wide bandwidth as those with more cue systems and low bandwidth as fewer cue systems.

Although many words carry multiple meanings to various or even the same listeners, abstract concepts like trust have even more associative meanings. “Trust” is often used interchangeably with confidence, reliance, and faith although each of these words is fraught with their own abstract associations and value-laden definitions (Stack, 1978).

Nissenbaum (1999) sees trust as a form of confidence in another person, confidence that the other person, despite a capacity to do harm, will do the right thing. Trust requires the perceived qualities of virtue, loyalty, prudence, and a desire for the good opinion of others (Parks et al., 1995). People realize that those they trust may exercise their power to harm, disappoint, or betray; yet at the same time they regard those other as if they mean well, or, at least, mean no harm (Nissenbaum, 1999).

Trust development begins from the moment of birth; each individual encounters other people who treat them positively or negatively, who keep their promises or do not. We each then generalize from our past experience to develop expectancies about how the next person will treat us. We then generalize these experiences into our outlook on the trustworthiness of any or all individuals. The abstractness of “trust” as term is explicit in that different persons may perceive identical situations differently and one of the determinants of this perception is the individual’s level of generalized trust. People who trust few others respond differently to situations than those who trust nearly everyone

Nissenbaum (1999) states one of the most convincing forms of evidence that others merit trust in their past behavior. Those that behaved well in the past, protected our interests, did not cheat or betray us and, in general, acted in a trustworthy manner, are likely to elicit trust in the future. If they do not fulfill our past hopes, then we will tend not to trust them in future interactions.

While most people find it important to trust others they also find it necessary to assess each situation before investing their trust. Some of the considerations that go into making trust/mistrust equations are: the personal characteristics and intentions of the partner, and the potential rewards (Stack, 1978). As the relationship grows and changes, the experiences on which trust is based will change and the interpretations of the experiences will also progress from a more straightforward acceptance of behavioral evidence to the introspective attribution of interpersonal motives (Rempel et al., 1985).

Therefore trust is seen to evolve out of past experience and prior interaction with the other person and people in general. Based on these experiences trust develops as the relationship matures. As the relationship grows attributions are made to partner; such as they are regarded as reliable, dependable, and concerned with providing expected rewards. To trust a person must have a willingness to put oneself at risk, be it through intimate disclosure, reliance on another’s promises, sacrificing present rewards for future gains, and so on. Finally trust is defined by feelings of confidence and security in the caring responses of the partner and the strength of the relationship. These considerations point to a model of trust with three components that reflect increasing levels of attributional abstraction - predictability, dependability, and faith. Convictions are thus

held and acted on in the present, with the confident expectation that future events will prove them to be correct (Rempel et al., 1985).

Baker (1998) states that in offline circumstances people meet in real time, physically present, and then proceed to talk on the phone and write, perhaps. The decision to progress in developing the relationship is made after only the first stage of communication. In online relationships the pattern may lengthen in three stages, rather than two: meeting online and writing, then talking on the phone and then meeting in person. Lengthening of the relationship formation process may make up for the lack of wide-bandwidth in the initial interactions. Rheingold (1993) described the relationship development on the Internet as putting a different spin on affiliation: “in traditional kinds of communities, we are accustomed to meeting people, than getting to know them; in virtual communities, you can get to know people then choose to meet them.”

CMC relationships can be deepened and trust displayed by contacting chat friends via email. Extending the conversation to email or telephone conversations, is a sign of increased intimacy and/or commitment to the relationship. As the relationships grow and trust further develops, writing styles may change as composition can become more casual, detailed, and expressive. Partners feel safe to explore. The relationship regresses when they feel threatened, hurt, or angry and some facet of trust is lost (Suler, 2000).

As trust deepens the partners may exchange photographs. Baker (1998) also found that the importance of an exchange of photographs varies by person. For some it was not crucial because the feelings were already present. For others the exchange of photographs was critical to developing a deeper relationship. They needed to tell if physical attraction could occur to match the mental and emotional bonding.

As trust and intimacy deepen the partners may agree to meet FtF for the first time. These meetings subsequently change how the other person is perceived online. Meeting FtF can enrich the online relationship and/or challenges the image one had of the online other (Suler, 2000).

Weinstock (1999) states that trust is an important lubricant of the social system. No successful relationship can be formed without it. For CMC to function properly and teenagers/adolescents to enjoy their CMC experience trust must be formed and maintained.

## **5. Methodology**

### **5.1 Definition**

In evaluating the trust development and maintenance processes used by teenagers the following operationalized definition of trust is adopted from the Larzelere et al. (1980) definition of trust as the extent to which a person believes the other to be honest and genuinely interested in a partner's welfare.

In this conceptual framework the characteristics of trust in online relationships have been adapted from Baker (1998) and Rheingold (1993) as follows:

1. Sharing simple personal information online such as first names, school information, etc.
2. Sharing more personal information such as full names, street addresses, etc.
3. Sending email to each other
4. Calling on the phone
5. Meeting in person

Though in numbered order the list is not progressive or hierarchical. The teenagers can move through the steps back and forward in fluid motion as meets their individual definition of trust.

Gilbert (1970) states that actual age limits for adolescence cannot be pinpointed exactly because pubescent onset varies with the individual. For this study teenager/adolescent is operationally defined as those 11 to 18.

## **5.2 Location**

This study will be conducted in three chatrooms at Chatropolis <http://www.chatropolis.com>: Chat Central, Date Maker, and School Yard. Each room has a maximum population of 30. Teenagers primarily populate these rooms. As with all anonymous online communication it is impossible to guarantee that all the persons in the room are teenagers. Therefore special effort will be taken to remove from consideration in this study, communications from those who state they are over 18 years of age.

## **5.3 Research Methods**

Three primary research methods will be used to evaluate the research questions: ethnography, structured interviews, and content analysis.

This study draws on ethnographic analysis to observe and analyze the interactions of the teens within their social structure. The author has been a part of the communities of these three rooms for the last two years, serving as a voluntary moderator for the Chatropolis site. To compensate for this familiarity as well as to view the teenager's interaction with and without an authority figure present, observations will be made both anonymously under a new persona and while acting as a moderator using an established identity.

Structured interviews (Appendix 1) will be conducted with randomly selected users in all three rooms. These interviews will focus on the teenager's definition of trust as it relates to chatrooms and their personal experience with trust development and disintegration in online relationships. The initial interviewee will be identified as the fourth person to enter the room after the author enters. Subsequent interviewees will be the fourth person to

enter the room after completion of the previous interview. A minimum of 40 persons will be interviewed via this process.

Finally content analysis will be used to evaluate the discourse between teenagers as it relates to trust development, maintenance, and disintegration. Two independent validators will be used to verify and refine categories for both the interview and content analysis data.

Data collection will be via computer download. Files will be saved for further analysis. There will be three collection periods, one per month. Data will be collected for one seven day week 24 hours per day in each room per period. This structure allows for the necessary longitudinal study of trust development as well as accommodating the international character of the Chatropolis community.

## Appendix 1

### Examples of Structured Interview Questions:

1. How do you know when you trust someone you meet in a chatroom?
2. How would you show that you trusted that person?
3. How would you expect that person to show they trusted you?
4. Have you had situations where you placed your trust in someone in a chatroom and they let you down? If yes, what happened?
5. Place the following in order from first to last showing what you would reveal to someone you trusted in a chatrooms:
  - a. Real first name
  - b. Real last name
  - c. Arrange to meet them in person
  - d. Home town
  - e. School name
  - f. Phone number
  - g. Street address
  - h. Anonymous email address (such as hotmail, yahoo, etc)
  - i. Real personal email address

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