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Review: *Trust*—The Increasing Dangers for Children in a Digital World

By Ashley Huntington

When we first meet Annie Cameron, she is preparing for her high school volleyball tryout—listening to music, making a smoothie, and chatting with friends online. Several instant messages from Annie’s friends show up on the screen, many wishing her good luck. Messages she receives from her “friend” Charlie however, are different from the rest. Charlie gives Annie advice and tips for acing her tryout. While he makes himself out to be a volleyball expert, what Annie does not realize is that he hides secrets, which would prove to be disastrous to her fourteen year-old life. Because of the technology that exists in today’s society, older men like Charlie are able to prey on young girls online, hiding their true identities behind the guise of chat rooms and text messages, while eluding law enforcement officers through the use of “ghost programs” and pre-paid mobile phones.

Soon after her volleyball tryout, Annie celebrates her fourteenth birthday with her family, much of which is filled with talk about starting high school. We learn that Annie has an average family life, living in the suburbs of Chicago with one older brother and one younger sister. She opens presents from each family member, saving her dad’s present for last. When Annie finally opens it, she is thrilled to see a brand new, top-of-the-line laptop. While her parents see this gift as one that will help Annie in high school, especially for doing research and writing papers, Annie sees it as a tool to talk to her friends online in chat rooms, through instant messaging, and through social media websites. While such sites have become hugely popular with teenagers much like Annie, in actuality, the sites present real dangers to today’s young, the most serious being child victimization by sexual predators. Annie’s fascination with this technology becomes more and more apparent as she begins staying up late and running to her room after school to talk to Charlie.

Annie’s friendship with Charlie is not a secret to her family—she openly talks about him at dinner, mentioning that he plays volleyball for his high school just like she does. Soon enough, Annie becomes more reclusive about her relationship with Charlie, choosing to withhold a confession Charlie reveals. Charlie divulges to Annie that he’s not the sixteen year-old high school volleyball player that he claimed to be, but that he’s a twenty-year old college volleyball player. He later lies again and tells Annie that he is in fact a twenty-five year old graduate student. Annie becomes increasingly upset with Charlie’s lies, but decides to brush it off and continues talking to him online. Little does Annie realize, Charlie’s lies are the first of many.

Outside of her online life, Annie struggles to navigate high school while being pressured by older girls to go to parties and shop for sexier clothing. Although she tries to talk about her struggles with her dad, he brushes Annie off, telling her that he has a large project to finish for work. After being ignored by her father, Annie finds comfort in talking to Charlie on the phone, though Charlie finds this vulnerability in Annie as an opportunity to shift their conversation to one of a more sexual nature. He inquires about

the sexy bra Annie purchased at the mall, and although Annie seems reluctant to participate in this sexually-charged conversation, she slowly eases into it, hoping to impress Charlie.

Several lies later, Annie continues to ignore Charlie's shady personality and agrees to meet up with him when her parents leave town. Annie dresses scantily for her first meeting with Charlie, hoping to give off a more mature appearance. As Annie becomes concerned that Charlie has not yet arrived, she calls him—though a voice from behind her calling her name sounds eerily familiar. The man standing before Annie is not the Charlie that she thought she knew. The man standing before Annie is much older than the sixteen, twenty, or twenty-five-year-old that he claimed to be. Annie begins to cry as she realizes that her perfect guy is not who she thought he was and that she put herself into a dangerous situation. Charlie sees that the situation is quickly escalating and begins to tell Annie he loves her and that they are soul mates, in an attempt to save his meeting with her.

Charlie's smooth-talking in person proves to be just as effective as his smooth-talking online as he convinces Annie to have ice cream with him, and later persuades her to join him back at his hotel room to "try on" the lingerie that he bought for her. As Annie slowly and nervously steps out of the bathroom to show off her red lingerie, Charlie nearly salivates when he sees her and then encourages her to sit on the bed with him. When Charlie begins kissing Annie's neck, she panics and begs him to wait and to stop. None of this matters, though, as Charlie takes full control of the situation and pins Annie down only to proceed with using her teenage body for his pleasure.

After Annie's encounter with Charlie she becomes visibly withdrawn at home, at school, and with friends. Annie clings to her mobile phone and her laptop hoping for a message from Charlie. Concerned, Annie's friend informs school officials about Annie's relationship with Charlie, prompting a police and FBI investigation. While Annie's parents are desperate for answers and legal action, *Trust* depicts the reality of what happens in the world of sexual crimes against minors. Given the use of technology-based platforms, the FBI noted that there is a national backlog in these cases. In Illinois alone, there are over 2,000 cases waiting to be processed, and most victims have to wait at least a year before legal action can be pursued.

Throughout the investigation, we see Annie struggle to make sense of her everyday life—she disengages from school and her friends, and becomes angry with her parents and law enforcement for trying to prosecute Charlie. She becomes particularly defensive of Charlie because she believes that he was in love with her and did not actually rape her. The investigation takes a toll on Annie's family as well, as her parents start fighting and her dad makes it his mission to find Charlie and kill him. Annie's dad begins spending his days at work searching the online National Sex Offender Registry, flying across the country to meet experts in the online crime field, and driving around late at night stalking a man he believes to be Charlie. Although the FBI tells Annie's family that the DNA they were able to get from Annie's examination after the rape matches DNA in their database, the DNA belongs to a "John Doe"—a man who has yet to be identified, even though he has committed other sexual crimes against underage girls.

While Annie and her family come to terms with reality, we learn that Charlie continues to elude FBI investigators through the use of a “ghost program”—a program that makes his Internet protocol (IP) address nearly impossible to trace. This anonymity is furthered by his use of a pre-paid mobile phone to chat with Annie. In this respect, *Trust* gives viewers a glimpse at the increasingly large role that mobile phones have in facilitating sex crimes against young girls. It has been estimated that over 75 percent of the world's population has access to a mobile phone, proving the ease of use and wide availability of such devices. Further, with options such as pre-paid or pay-as-you-go mobile phones, men like Charlie are able to obtain these devices quickly, cheaply, and with no contract, background and credit checks, or personal identification required to make the purchase. Such pre-paid and pay-as-you-go devices have been described as “one of the last remaining anonymous communication tools,” making them ideal for older men seeking to prey on young girls.

Perhaps most haunting about Annie's story is the ending, as *Trust* gives the audience a look at what happens in some cases like Annie's. At the end of the movie, we see Charlie at a fair with his family—a wife and young son. We also learn that Charlie is a high school physics teacher as he is greeted by one of his students. It seems that Charlie has gotten away with his crime by using the very technology that makes our everyday lives easier—texting, social media, and chat rooms.

Although Congress has enacted a number of acts to aid in protecting children online, such as the Child Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA), and the Communications Decency Act, the new advances in technology that seem to come daily continue to provide ease of access to criminals looking to prey on underage children. *Trust* uses Annie as an example to show how easily children can be manipulated through the Internet, and how that manipulation can prove to be disastrous in the lives of young children. The issue of the Internet with its social media website and chat rooms, as well as mobile phones, and their potential dangers for children is timely, as new platforms for communicating are created daily, further opening the doors for adults to prey on children. While these technologies make our daily lives easier, they can be dangerous for children and should be closely monitored.

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