

# Factors Related to Initiating Interpersonal Contacts on Internet Dating Sites: A View From the Social Exchange Theory<sup>1</sup>

Rivka Shtatfeld  
*Beit Berl College, Israel*

Azy Barak  
*University of Haifa, Israel*

## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify factors that influence dating-site users to initiate contact with potential romantic partners. The study was carried out by observing online behaviors and analyzing the profiles and authentic messages of these users ( $N = 106$ ) over seven months. Contacts made by and with the research participants were analyzed in terms of the relationships between initiators' and receivers' demographic variables (marital status, age, level of education, income), writing skills, and stated physical appearance. In addition, the relationship between contacting partners and site accessibility was examined. The findings revealed that dating-site users initiated contact primarily with those having a similar marital status or slightly better characteristics (income, education, writing skills). In regard to writing skills, it was found that skilled writers attracted more contacts than did less skilled writers. However, the factor that was found to be most significantly related to initiating contact was the length of time that elapsed from last connection to the site, which implies the perceived accessibility of potential romantic partners. The findings were explained in terms of the Social Exchange Theory: people are attracted to those who grant them rewards.

**Keywords:** Internet, online dating, virtual romance, Social Exchange Theory, writing skills.

In the past few years, Internet dating sites have become busy virtual places. The number of people making use of these sites has increased considerably all over the world, and is now estimated to be in the hundreds of millions (Arvidsson, 2006; Lawson & Leck, 2006; Madden & Lenhart, 2006; Smith, 2005). Most of these sites were created for commercial purposes to provide a fee-based service for people seeking partners, but there are numerous dating sites offering the service free of charge. The majority of dating websites share a common technological base: an Internet-based platform

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence concerning this manuscript should be addressed to Azy Barak, Department of Counseling and Human Development, Faculty of Education, University of Haifa, Aba Hushi Rd., Mount Carmel, Haifa 31905, Israel. E-mail: azy@construct.haifa.ac.il

composed of a database containing information provided by the users themselves, an advanced search engine that enables users to find potential partners, and a variety of online communication tools made available to the users (e.g., personal mailboxes functioning like e-mail, a chat interface for synchronized dialog with other users). The database consists of open information available in a personal profile page supplied by the users (such as age, gender, personal characteristics, appearance, description of expectations of a partner and of the romantic relationship; a picture is frequently attached) and confidential information (such as e-mail address, telephone number). Searching, finding, filtering, and contacting potential partners constitute the main activities of users of Internet dating sites (Baker, 2005; Couch & Liamputtong, 2008; Donn & Sherman, 2002; Fiore, 2004; Fiore & Donath, 2004, 2005; Gunter, 2008; Whitty & Carr, 2006).

Dating sites proffer a distinctive social environment that in many respects differs from other online platforms (Whitty, 2008). As mentioned, most were created as profit-making enterprises (Smith, 2005); therefore, their owners consider it important for reputation- enhancement and marketing purposes that many successful romantic relationships are established by means of their sites. For this reason, and in view of the increasing number of users of dating sites, much effort is invested in creating advanced, efficient search engines that can facilitate easy, effective searching for partners. To this end, most of the existing search engines in use on dating sites today were set up by taking into account the conceptions and theories dealing with attraction and compatibility factors between romantic partners (Arvidsson, 2006; Fiore & Donath, 2004). These include, for example, the assumption that age and height are determining factors about the decision to contact a partner. However, these assumptions are largely drawn from the traditional world of dating (face-to-face) so that online search engines are not necessarily sufficiently or effectively adapted to Web-dating. The purpose of the present study was to examine some of the popular features used for making contacts on Internet dating sites. More specifically, we examined the relevance of Social Exchange Theory for understanding online relationship development, particularly attempting identify factors associated with attraction to online dating partners.

There are several theories that explain the main principles governing the need to create a relationship between partners—a need based upon an assumption about interpersonal attraction. One of the most important of these is the Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958), which asserts that people establish reciprocal relationships based on mutual interests. Underlying this theory is the assumption that in

establishing relationships in general, and romantic relationships in particular, people are attracted to those who can impart reinforcement and grant them rewards of various kinds. This argument has received support in many studies on relationships in the offline environment (e.g., Aronson, 2003; Byrne, 1971; Sprecher, 1998; Walster, Walster, & Berschied, 1978). The principles of the Social Exchange Theory defined one of the main factors governing interpersonal attraction, according to which people are attracted to or are interested in people similar to themselves and to those who offer meaningful resources (such as appearance, education, income, and health) that may be converted into possible rewards. This principle is reflected in experiencing 'equity', as partners feel 'they get what they deserve' in terms of relevant factors, such as attractiveness, personality, and so on. To date, this subject has not been carefully investigated in the context of creating relationships via the Internet. In searching for possible sources of romantic attraction online, the present study has attempted to examine and identify factors responsible for the creating of contact between partners on dating sites.

The rewards and reinforcements related to attraction between partners in offline environments touch upon a variety of aspects. For example, people tend to have relationships with those who reside near them, since meeting requires less effort and reinforces the sense of security that derives from geographic proximity, frequent meetings, familiar surroundings, and convenience. These are factors that reinforce the desire to create a relationship, since they set the scene for the repeated, and perhaps frequent, exposure of partners residing near each other (Aronson, 2003; Zajonc, 2003). Nonetheless, one of the unique characteristics of online relationships has to do with the fact that geographic proximity is unnecessary, since a large proportion of interpersonal communication takes place virtually, not face-to-face, but magnified by durable, including asynchronous, written text (as opposed to telephone contact). In other words, instead of the traditional and conventional view of offline dating, the ability to interact online, including for romantic purposes, is linked to and depends upon two basic components: the presence of an Internet connection and the partners' virtual presence in the same online environment. Thus, the displaying of a presence together with a partner in a virtual environment, such as a forum, chat room, or 'lobby' of a dating site, for reasonable amounts of time constitutes a substitute for geographic proximity and face-to-face communication and create grounds for a possible bonding (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Holme, Edling & Liljeros, 2004; Levine, 2000). On dating sites, therefore, people appear to make contact with and are more attracted to potential partners who seem more

accessible and available (Fiore & Donath, 2004, 2005; Baker, 2008) as an alternative to geographic proximity. Support for this claim can be observed in the finding that dating-site users who send frequent written messages and reply to them more often are considered more attractive by their partners (Ghoshal & Holme, 2005), as they are perceived to be more present in the virtual environment.

Another finding related to the desire to form a relationship with a potential partner is that people tend to be attracted to those who resemble them in looks, viewpoints, personality traits, and interests (Aronson, 2003; Berscheid & Hatfield, 1978; Buss, 2002; Byrne, 1971; Morry, 2007). In the context of Social Exchange Theory, it appears that people believe that forming a close relationship with someone similar to themselves constitutes acceptance, approval, and reinforcement of self. This is of special importance for a relationship with a potential online partner because—unlike face-to-face meetings in which common interests and characteristics are generally uncovered over a period of time—the very fact of being present in the same virtual environment indicates a similar desire and common interest from the outset. This perception stems from the simple fact that the meeting place itself implies the intentions of those present in it (Levine, 2000; Merkle & Richardson, 2000; Parks & Floyd, 1996; Whitty & Gavin, 2001). Lastly, the dynamics of dating are similar in both environments: people prefer those who are similar to themselves in attitudes, traits, and desires because this similarity reinforces their self-concept (Aronson, 2003; Festinger, 1954; Levine, 2000). As mentioned above, it seems that many of the search engines used in dating sites were indeed created on the assumption that people require information about potential partners so as to feed the equation relating to various aspects of similarity, such as socioeconomic factors, personality, and interests (Fiore & Donath, 2004; 2005). The ways in which people employ these parameters to assess the degree of similarity between partners on dating sites and the association between the apparent similarity and actual contacts made with online partners have not as yet been investigated.

In addition to the factors mentioned above as causes of the desire of individuals to make contact with each other, undoubtedly looks play an important role in interpersonal attraction.

This is true not only in relation to dating and courtship but also in other social circumstances, such as the formation of friendships and selection for a job. Here, too, Social Exchange Theory offers an explanation: attraction based on physical appearance causes aesthetic pleasure—it is nice to be in the presence of pretty people (Ettcof, 1999; Rubenstein, Langlois & Kalakanis, 1999). Furthermore, people tend to attribute positive

characteristics to physically attractive people as demonstrated by the “Halo Effect” (Asch, 1946) and the well-known stereotype of “what is beautiful is good” (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972). In general, people tend to imagine the physical appearance of a virtual partner in terms of a subjective interpretation of his/her written description (Baker, 2005, 2008; Fiore & Donath, 2005; Whitty, 2003a; Whitty & Carr, 2006). The fantasy that is developed with regard to the partner is usually more related to one's personal needs and motives than to the actual information received about the other person (Arvidsson, 2006; Barak, 2007). It is, therefore, not uncommon for many virtual meetings to come to an end immediately after the first face-to-face meeting, which may destroy the fantasy built up about the prospective partner's appearance (Baker, 2000; 2005; Ben-Ze'ev, 2004; Whitty, 2003b, 2007; Whitty & Carr, 2006). In this context, it should be noted that although many users post their pictures on dating sites, photographs often do not reflect one's looks sufficiently accurately, either on purpose or innocently (Hitsch, Hortacsu, & Ariely, 2005; Whitty, 2008).

The partners' respective abilities and skills also constitute motivational factors leading to possible interest and attraction. Those with special abilities and skills are perceived as more attractive because people feel more valuable in the presence of talented others. That is consistent with the Social Exchange Theory: the more a partner with whom an interaction is taking place is perceived as being more talented and skilled, the greater the self-esteem a person accords to himself or herself (Aronson, 2003; Tesser, 2000). This is probably the reason that users of dating sites tend to attribute to themselves qualities that they may not have (such as a sense of humor, creativity, empathy, and considerateness); if they seem thereby to be more valuable, they will attract more partners to contact them (Baker, 2005; Whitty & Carr, 2006).

Another factor, from a different angle, that appears to be directly related to contacting partners on dating sites is their ability to express themselves in writing. Skilled writers are those who express themselves in accordance with accepted conventions, use precise syntax and grammar, proofread their texts, and have a writing style that is fluent, coherent, and clear. Such writing skills are likely to be considered attractive because they supposedly indicate that the writer possesses various positive qualities. Furthermore, skilled writers are able to adapt their style to particular readers, to the relevant aspects of a discourse, and to the context in which they are writing (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Field, 2004). Accordingly, skilled writers are more likely to find the Net an environment that more easily enables forming romantic relationships than do those with poorer writing skills (Suler, 2000). Consequently, it

was argued that people with greater writing skills attract more partners online than the less skilled (Levine, 2000). The written discourse has another advantage: it may include verbal stimuli. Often a partner in a virtual relationship is perceived as attractive and sexually able because the written discourse is projectively interpreted in such a way that it adapts to the romantic fantasy of each partner (Barak, 2007; Ben-Ze'ev, 2004; Levine, 2000; Merkle & Richardson, 2003; Suler, 2004). Therefore, the written word is in many ways a substitute for a person's physical appearance, given the conditions of invisibility and anonymity in online communication.

The current study examined the relationship between contacting partners in dating sites and the factors mentioned above, the assumption being that in online dating, too, people are attracted to those who grant them rewards. Specifically, the research hypotheses examined dating-site users who made contact online in relation to three factors: similarity between partners, online availability, and writing skills.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The study was conducted among users of the dating site "Nifgashim" (<http://www.nifgashim.net>) in Israel, which had 17,000 active members registered to the site during the period of the study. Use of this site is free of charge. A letter was distributed to all the site's registered users asking them to volunteer for the research aimed to investigate participating in dating sites. The study was conducted on a sample of 106 users who were asked and agreed to take part in a study concerning users' activity on the site in return for promising them complete confidentiality. The participants included 59 men (19 bachelors, 15 divorced, 25 married) and 47 women (14 never married, 12 divorced, 21 married), with an average age of 42.94 years ( $SD = 9.38$ ). The participants were observed and followed during a period of one week by means of the server log records of their activities. An additional observation was conducted on 88 of these participants (18 participants dropped out of the study because they either did not engage in any interaction or withdrew their registration from the study) over the course of seven months. Furthermore, from amongst all first contacts that the participants made with other users (approximately 4,000), a random sample was selected of four partners with whom each participant had made contact, thus

representing (by approximately 10% ratio) the total number of contacts made. The average age of these 352 partners was 41.94 years ( $SD = 8.82$ ).

### *Measures and Data Collection*

Data for the study were obtained from three sources: records of all activities of the participants on the server hosting the dating site (such as initiating contact with other users, time of site log-in and log-out), participants' personal profiles (on which time of last log-out was presented and available for all), and observation of written communications between the participants and their contacts. It can therefore be assumed that the information collected during the course of the study closely reflects occurrences on the site. During the course of the study, two observations were conducted: one observation, over a period of a week, documented communications in which other users made first contact with the study participants in an attempt to initiate contact. In addition, the profiles of the 88 participants and the 352 partners whom they first contacted were observed over a period of seven months. The latter observation, which was conducted in order to study the people whom the participants contacted, included only those participants whose profiles contained the relevant demographic information (such as age, family status, education, or declared physical appearance). This group included between 83 and 88 participants (due to missing data).

In order to study the relationship between contacting partners and their writing skills, the texts appearing in the personal profiles of the participants and the partners whom they contacted were examined by three judges, who were psychology counselors. The variable of the level of writing skills was studied using the model developed by Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987), which defines several levels. A skilled writer with good writing skills is one who is able to employ a rich vocabulary fluently with no grammatical or syntactical errors, can produce a coherent and flowing text containing meaningful sentences, and is also able to take the potential reader into consideration; that is, the writer avoids the pitfall of compelling the reader to fill in the gaps as so often happens with written texts on the Internet. The judges categorized the texts into three levels: high, average, and low.

The three judges were initially provided guidance and practice in analyzing texts, and thereafter they rated the writing skills of 30 profiles (prepared by users not included in the study). Kendall's coefficient of concordance ( $W$ ) among the judges at this stage was between .88 and .93 for several ratings. Following this practice session, the judges

were given the texts written in 435 personal profiles by the study participants and by the partners whom they had contacted. The coefficient of concordance among the judges on the research data was very high ( $W = .87$ ). The examination of writing skills was conducted only for participants ( $n = 87$ ) and potential partners ( $n = 348$ ) whose profiles contained free text that made the evaluation possible.

## Results

### *Similarity of Demographic Variables and Contacting Partners*

The relationship between the degree of similarity of participants and contacting partners was examined in regard to four demographic variables: marital status, level of education, level of income, and declared physical appearance. A significant relationship was found between the *marital status* of the 88 participants and the 352 contacts that were made ( $\chi^2 = 149.28$ ;  $df = 4$ ;  $p < .0001$ ). This analysis showed that most of the contacts by bachelors were made with singles (48%) and divorced (44%); married people contacted mostly married people (67%), and divorced people mainly made contact with divorced partners (70%).

In order to examine the distribution of messages to partners by *level of education*, this variable was divided into those with university degrees and those without. Again, a significant relationship was found between the participants' level of education and the users whom they contacted ( $\chi^2 = 6.05$ ;  $df = 1$ ;  $p < .02$ ) although this relationship was weaker than that related to marital status. The frequency distribution of contacts showed that participants at both levels of education preferred partners with academic education although the rate at which the non-university educated wrote to the university educated (57%) was lower than the rate that the university educated wrote to others with university education (72%).

In examining the relationship between participants' *income level* and that of the partners whom they contacted, the income level categories (as stated on the personal profiles) were divided into two categories: (1) average or below; (2) above-average. No significant correlation was found between the income level of participants and that of the users whom they contacted ( $\chi^2 = 1.49$ ;  $df = 1$ ;  $p > .05$ ): participants at both income levels (54% of those with average or below-average income, and 62% of those with above-average income) were inclined to favor users with average or below-average income.



In order to study the relationship between participants' *declared physical appearance* and that of the users whom they contacted, users' own reports about their looks, as stated in their personal profiles, were analyzed. The distribution of physical appearance was divided into average/good looks and very good looks. Although those having a very good appearance had a slight inclination to prefer others like them (63%), as opposed to those of average/good appearance who contacted users having a very good appearance (55%), no significant relationship was found between the two variables ( $\chi^2 = 1.52$ ;  $df = 1$ ;  $p > .05$ ).

#### *Availability and Accessibility on the Site and of Contacting Partners*

In order to examine the degree to which people prefer to initiate contact with partners who are perceived as available and accessible, the relationship between the 432 contacts that 106 participants received from other users of the site and the length of time that elapsed from when they last accessed the site (information openly provided at the site) was examined. As can be seen in Table 1, a highly significant association was found between the number of contacts and the length of elapsed time from when participants connected to the site ( $\chi^2 = 500.46$ ;  $df = 3$ ;  $p < .0001$ ). Participants who had recently connected to the site (two hours previously or less) received approximately 71% of the messages from other users, whereas participants who had last been connected to the site for six or more hours received only a low percentage of messages (approximately 12%).

Table 1  
Frequency of Contacts Directed to Participants since Their Last Entry to Dating Site  
( $N=106$ )

Last Entry to Site	<i>n</i>	%
Less than 2 hours	306	70.83
2-6 hours	74	17.12
6-12 hours	15	3.48
More than 12 hours	37	8.57
Total	432	100
$\chi^2$		500.46*

\* $df = 3$ ;  $p < .0001$

The data presented in Table 1 were divided by gender in order to examine whether a difference exists between men and women in initiating contact as related to perceived availability. Table 2 shows the number of contacts made by length of time elapsed from participants' last entry to the site, by gender. These results were found similar to those presented in Table 1: for both female ( $\chi^2 = 443.83$ ;  $df = 3$ ;  $p < .0001$ ) and male participants ( $\chi^2 = 61.46$ ;  $df = 3$ ;  $p < .0001$ ), there is a strong relationship between time elapsed from last entry to the site and number of contacts received. However, there seems to be more flexibility toward women than men, as women received more contacts than did men when more than two hours elapsed from last access to the site (30% versus 13%, respectively). This difference was not found statistically significant though ( $\chi^2 = 3.13$ ;  $df = 1$ ;  $p > .05$ ).

Table 2  
Frequency of Contacts Directed to Participants since Their Last Entry to Dating Site, by Gender

Last Entry to Site	<i>n</i>	<u>Men</u>		<u>Women</u>	
		<i>n</i> =59	%	<i>n</i>	%
Less than 2 hours	26	86.67	280	69.65	
2-6 hours	3	10.00	71	17.66	
6-12 hours	1	3.33	14	3.48	
More than 12 hours	0	0	37	9.20	
Total contacts	30	100	402	100	
$\chi^2$	61.46*		443.83*		

\* $df = 3$ ;  $p < .0001$

In addition, the relationship between the initiation of a contact and online availability was examined in the context of marital status. These findings are presented in Table 3. The pattern for single, divorced, and married people is similar: for all of them, a significant association exists between availability of participants and the percentage of contacts made with them, whereas the difference between marital statuses is small. It seems, however, that married participants are a little more tolerant than singles in contacting partners in relation to time of last use of the site (33.1% versus 20.6%, respectively, contacted partners that log-out six or more hours before, ( $\chi^2 = 6.48$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < .02$ ).

Table 3  
 Frequency of Contacts Directed to Participants since Their Last Entry to Dating Site, by Marital Status

Last entry to site	Unmarried n=33		Divorced n=27		Married n=46	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Less than 2 hours	47	72.30	61	85.92	198	66.89
2-6 hours	9	13.86	10	14.08	55	18.57
6-12 hours	2	3.07	0	0	13	4.39
More than 12 hours	7	10.77	0	0	30	10.14
Total contacts	65	100	71	100	296	100
$\chi^2$	79.19*		144.26*		289.10*	

\* $df = 3; p < .001$

### *Writing Skills and Contacting Partners*

In order to study the extent to which users of a dating site initiate contact with partners according to their partners' writing skills, as well as the correlation between their own writing skills and those of the partners contacted, the relationship between participants' and contacted partners' writing skills was examined. The relationship was found to be significant ( $\chi^2 = 28.34; df = 4; p < .0001$ ). As hypothesized, participants with low writing skills (reflected in their profiles) received the fewest contacts (19% of all contacts made); the differentiation between contacts initiated with those having average and those with high writing skills was less clear-cut (46% and 35%, respectively, of all contacts made). It was also found that those with low writing skills made contact with others with low writing skills at a higher rate (30%) than they did with those who have better writing skills than theirs (16%). To complete this phenomenon, it was found that participants with better writing skills made contact mostly with people of their own level (48%) and less so with those of average writing ability (39%) or those having low writing skills (6%). Thus, it seems that there is support for the hypothesis that there is an association between users' writing skills and those of the partners with whom they initiate contact.

## **Discussion**

This study attempted to examine the factors and unique characteristics that affect initiating contact with partners on dating sites and to explain this behavior by means of theories of interpersonal attraction in face-to-face interactions. The findings of the study

show that users of dating sites seem to act, consciously or not, on the basis of certain motives that are not necessarily connected to the attractiveness of the potential partner that affect their decision about initiating contact. Specifically, the findings showed that there is a relationship between people's demographic variables (especially socioeconomic status and educational level), perceived availability on the site, and writing skills and their interpersonal dating contacts. Of all the variables examined, perceived availability on the site turned out to be overwhelmingly the most significant in the decision to make contact with another user. It must be remembered, however, that because this was a cross-sectional designed study and not experimental-longitudinal, it is not possible to draw causal conclusions, which must remain speculative at this stage. An experimental design based on repeated observations could better identify if the factors that emerged in the present study actually determined making contacts with online partners.

The similarity component as an attraction factor is considered important, and various explanations for this are offered by different schools of psychology. Generally—based on studies that examined interpersonal attraction in face-to-face situations—the assumption is that attraction to another with similar characteristics grants the initiating partner a reward in that it creates a condition of balance and calm (Heider, 1958) as opposed to the discomfort and tension that is likely to arise when there is a lack of similarity. Moreover, it seems that the principle of equity, that refers to perceived balance of personal benefits from the dating behavior relationship commitment (Floyd & Wasner, 1994; Michaels, Acock, & Edwards, 1986; Sprecher, 2001) is of much significance, too. In the present study, this hypothesis was examined in relation to the demographic variables of marital status, level of education, and physical appearance. With regard to physical appearance, owing to the invisibility that is a characteristic of online communication, the hypothesis was examined in the light of the self-reporting of participants about the quality of their appearance.

The study showed that people make contact on dating sites predominantly with others having a similar marital status: singles contact singles and married people contact married people. When it comes to education, it was found that users tend to make contact with those with a similar educational level or with those having a somewhat higher level of schooling. People with university education contacted those with academic degrees, whereas people without university education contacted others with and without university education at about the same rate. This may be explained by people's ambition to improve and upgrade their situation through making contact with a

partner who has qualities slightly better than their own. Similarly, participants of average/good physical appearance contacted at an equal rate those having similar looks to their own and those with better appearances. On the other hand, users with a very good physical appearance usually contacted others of very good physical appearance. These findings, too, are consistent with Social Exchange Theory, as people felt they get rewarded by achieving the comfort and calm of similarity or social benefits, rather than feeling uneasy by experiencing the social costs by being unrewarded or indebted (Rusbult, 1983).

Physical appearance is one of the important components of attraction between romantic partners. As mentioned, the present study investigated physical appearance on the basis of the self-reporting of users of dating sites in their personal profiles. This personal description is considered important, given the conditions of invisibility of the Internet, and provides the user with important information, particularly in view of the partial (and sometimes misleading) data that photographs offer if they are attached. It is in this sense that the text, which reflects users' writing skills, provides a way of filling in the gaps caused by invisibility. In this way, skilled writers who are able to describe their physical appearance attractively, and unrelated to their real looks, may be regarded as having a good appearance (Baker, 2008; Ben-Ze`ev, 2004; Whitty, 2008; Whitty & Carr, 2006).

The most remarkable finding emanating from this study is that users of dating sites tend to make contact with those who are perceived to be accessible and available; in other words, those who have entered the site most recently. The idea of availability as a primary factor in online interpersonal attraction seems to parallel a potential partner's physical-geographic availability in the offline environment. In the context of Social Exchange Theory, geographical proximity grants rewards because repeated exposure reduces the sense of uncertainty. The knowledge (or the belief) that it is possible to maintain contact with another person frequently or immediately encourages interpersonal interaction and generates positive feelings. In this sense, being present in the same virtual environment at the same time (or nearly so) apparently constitutes a substitute for geographic proximity in interpersonal connections offline (Holme et al., 2004; Levine, 2000). Furthermore, it is possible that people prefer to contact those who are frequently connected to the site because their presence constitutes a kind of 'compensation' for the Internet user's invisibility and anonymity. In other words, virtual presence creates a sense similar to physical presence, a confirmation of the realness of the partner, as it were, and thereby contributes to reducing the feelings of vagueness,

uncertainty, and lack of trust that characterize interpersonal interaction with virtual users.

Another possible explanation for the fact that people tend to make contact with those considered available might be related to primal needs for security and certainty. The desire for a potential partner who can offer an immediate response appears to be a primary psychological need in creating a relationship. It can be assumed that reducing the uncertainty inherent in contacting an anonymous person and increasing the likelihood of receiving a response constitute a primary survival need, similar to a baby, whose proper development depends on a sense of security that the mother's presence and her response to the child's needs provide (Winnicott, 1965; Klein, 1975). Thus, a possible explanation for our findings is that people contact, first and foremost, those who are perceived as present and available, since the latter might respond to their needs faster and provide the security and certainty needed to continue the romantic interaction.

The findings of the study support the hypothesis that skilled writing constitutes an important factor in creating a foundation for a romantic attraction on the Internet. The findings show that people make contact with those who are perceived as having similar writing skills (in the case of skilled writers) or those whose writing skills are somewhat better than theirs. It could be speculated, then, that writing is a skill that is perceived (or believed) as revealing additional qualities about the writer, possibly in the romantic domain. In other words, the Halo Effect reflects on dating sites, too, so people with good writing skills are valued positively for other qualities. The attraction to people with good writing skills can be explained in terms of Social Exchange Theory. That is, connecting with people perceived to be talented and skilled grants a reward in the sense that it raises the initiator's self-esteem and self-image (Aronson, 2003; Tesser, 2000). In the same sense, it is possible that people with good writing skills contact people similar to themselves in order to maintain their self-esteem and self-image.

In summary, it seems that contacting partners on dating sites is not a casual, random matter, nor is it based on simple factors, such as age, height, or an attractive picture. The findings show that dating sites provide a social environment where significant psychological components operate. In this virtual environment, people make contact with others who are perceived as available and who induce a feeling of security and self-esteem. Specifically, users contact others who are perceived as available and whose self-declared appearance, education, income, and writing skills are similar to or better than their own possibly in order to benefit personally by gaining self-validation or self-enhancement through such contacts.

The current research study has several limitations. The very fact that the research was based on a field study, in which participants volunteered to take part, might produce bias, mainly because of the lack of control over the type and representativeness of the participants. That is, it might have happened that people who were less sensitive about their privacy, or more educated than the target population, for example, were included in the sample, thus influencing the findings and limit the ability to generalize conclusions. In addition, as writing skills were analyzed only for participants who used free text in the profiles, this variable could have been biased, too. Furthermore, the research method, which was based only on ethnographic observation, not accompanied by interviews or obtaining direct information from the participants in another way, might have led to a situation in which important variables, such as previous personal experiences, relevant personal qualities, and so on, were not taken into account even though they may have had great value in the decision to make contact with partners. Future studies using additional research methods are likely to shed more light on the dynamics of making contact on dating sites in different ways. The results of the present study, however, introduce important preliminary findings that could advance understanding of the romantic virtual environment.

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*Received: August 27th, 2009*

*Accepted: December 30th, 2009*