

Virtual Attractivity and Partner Selection on the Internet

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Young people often use the Internet to communicate with other people, whether on the chat, on discussion servers, via ICQ or in forums. On the Internet, they find new friends, “soul mates” and romantic acquaintances. But taking into consideration the enormous number of the Internet raises a question about what criteria influence their choice of partners for online communication.

We intended to find answers to these questions in the presented research: On what clues do the Internet users base their opinion on another user, when they have but a limited amount of information that is available online? What factors influence their view of who is likable and who is not? What boosts the attractivity and what reduces it? Note that, in the context of this research, the word “attractivity“ is used (and should be understood) in general terms and does not necessarily have to have romantic connotations.

Attractivity in real world

Evaluation of the attractivity of another person is based on many bits of information from various sources and our final judgment results from the combining these bits of data (Feldman, 1985). Nevertheless, there are certain specific factors mentioned in the literature that undermine, increase or otherwise modify attractivity.

In face to face contact, physical appearance is one of the key factors that determine interpersonal attractivity. Physical propinquity and familiarity also play an important role. Similarity is of great significance as well. It turns out that we tend to be fond of people who share our views and avoid those whose opinions differ from ours (Feldman, 1985).

Attractivity in virtual environment

In some respects, these rules can be applied to cyberspace as well (Wallace, 1999). One of the factors that retain their significance is proximity – that is, how often do particular users meet in the same room or discussion thread and how often do they get in touch. It also applies that people tend to like those whom they believe to be of similar opinion as they are. Wallace also ascribes great importance to humor (according to her, those who do not take themselves too

seriously are more attractive). Both in real world and on the Internet, developing a close relationship requires a certain measure of self-disclosure and intimacy. The anonymity on the Internet helps many of its users to feel more secure which makes them more willing to disclose themselves to another person – this makes them more intimate and thus more attractive.

Nevertheless, when dealing with the virtual attractiveness, we must consider also the differences between virtual and real life communication. The Internet does not provide us with visual and auditive input which are both crucial in face to face contact. Users can modify their identity by giving inaccurate (or outright false) information about their age, their physical appearance or their marital status (Šmahel, 2003). People present themselves through a nick (or nickname, screen name) and in some cases also through a so-called avatar (or icon) – a small picture that appears next to a user's nick in some online discussions. Icons and nicks *de facto* represent the image of an adolescent in cyberspace. They can show off their interests or idols. According to Albright (2001), qualities more readily translatable to the typed environment may become more important: Qualities such as sense of humor, language skills, grammar, and aspects of the "inner self" such as common values or belief systems. The key factors in creating first impression are nick, personal profiles and the manner in which a particular person partakes in discussions. McQuillen (2003) states, that our evaluation of a person we cannot see is based predominantly on perceiving similarities.

Method and Participants

This research monitors the criteria for attractiveness in virtual environment, where the information about physical appearance is usually missing. Our aim was to find out how the attractiveness is perceived by the Internet users themselves. The presented research was qualitative. The sample consisted of experience Internet users who have been regular visitors to discussion boards and dating servers (namely www.rande.cz) for a long time. Seven people ranging in age from 19 to 35 were interviewed, four of them were females, three were males. The data were obtained from semi-structured interviews. Six respondents were interviewed online and one face to face, with dictaphone.

Our research method was based upon grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1999). The first step in the analysis was open coding, that is based on identifying, labeling and categorizing various phenomena that appear in the utterances. The relevant themes in the recorded interviews were identified and marked off in different colors for better organization. Each statement was assigned a label. Examples of labeling are given in the table no.1:

Table 1 Conceptualizing

Statement	Label/phenomenon
“(I like) those (avatars) that are one’s own – made by the users themselves – or somehow modified, at least.”	Creativity, activity
“...When someone is rude from the beginning, insults or humiliates you.”	Aggression, flaming

Thus we acquired a number of labels which we then sorted out into categories, which, in the context of grounded theory, corresponds with axial coding. The example is given in the table no. 2:

Table 2 Categorizing

Category	phenomena belonging to given category
Intelligence	Ability to formulate one’s opinion, ability to respond to context, suggestive posts, open-mindedness, comprehensibility of opinions, good argumentation, scope, ...
Similarity	The importance of common topics, shared interests, opinions, values, sharing interests that are unique and specific

Some broader categories were divided into sub-categories and some other contentually-related categories were merged into broader groups as new phenomena and inter-relations emerged during the process of analysis. The final step was to search for possible relations between the identified categories and sub-categories. This phase of the analysis corresponds with the phase of selective coding in grounded theory.

Results

The analysis of the interviews has shown that there are several factors that influence interpersonal attractiveness on the Internet. They are seen as personality traits and abilities and other qualities of a perceived person.

“**Similarity**” has turned out to be the most significant factor. All respondents claimed, that they need to find a common topic and share at least some interests and views with their partner. People that were, in one way or another, similar to the respondent were seen as attractive. For example, Lucka (35 years) says: *“Moreover, he’s got similar opinions on marriage, sex, children and other things that are important in one’s life.”* Some other Internet users (from discussion server www.nyx.cz) expressed similar views, for example: *“when their thoughts and opinions grab my interest, when I got to acknowledge that – well – there is*

something about it :) or when it's an opinion I identify with from the start" (anonymous user). It seems that in a virtual setting where we have no access to other, non-verbal information, similarity becomes one of the few reliable clues we can hold on to.

Another crucial factor is **interestingness** – a quality or characteristic that makes a particular person different from the others, makes them rise 'above the crowd' and thus enables them to get noticed and gain attention. As one of the respondents confessed: *"But you know what I found to be the most interesting thing about you? :o)))Your height...:o)))"* (author's note: 151 cm), (amadeo_x, 30 years, male). Certain amount of originality is required especially at www.rande.cz, during the initial stages of interaction. One of the respondents said, that a man has to (due to a large prevalence of males on the server) *"..address girls in such a way that they'll find his first message interesting and worth a reply...:o)"* (amadeo_x, 30, male). On the Internet, it is very easy to terminate contact or not to respond at all, since we do not need to worry about our partner's reaction (Suler, 2005), and if a man doesn't catch a woman's interest (and vice versa) when he addresses her for the first time, he may not get any response. One of the respondents also mentioned, that something that is new can be considered "interesting" as well: *„... (I get intrigued by) those who are somehow special, like swordplayers - their discussions open a new world for me, that is unknown and alluring :).“* (Ell, 21, female).

With interestingness is connected another important quality that increases the attractiveness of a user - **creativity**. It is mostly reflected by the user's choice of nick and avatar. From this point of view, most respondents found those icons that are clearly *"one's own – made by the users themselves – or somehow modified, at least"* (Cesare, 22, female) more interesting and attractive. The same rules apply to nicknames: *"(I prefer) original nicknames to those that were taken from a movie"* (Replik, 25, male). But creativity can be manifested even in our style of writing: *„I like, for example, when people write in some specific style, use archaic expressions and such...“* (Ell, 21, female). What distinguishes creativity from interestingness is users' own invention, the fact that the users create something themselves.

The respondents also often regarded their potential partners' **intelligence** - that means comprehensibility of their opinions, certain level of erudition and scope. Or as one of the respondents put it: *"(I like) intelligent, erudite posts, that inspire me or broaden my horizons... Simply something clever – when they are coherent and comprehensible in (expressing) their opinions, know something about the topic, read some literature, in a few words – when they know what they're talking about"* (Cesare, 22, female). Honzin77 put it more concisely: *"I can't date a girl... who doesn't know, why you've got a day off on 25th*

December” (male, 24). “Intelligence” as the respondents view it includes also open-mindedness as well as the ability to defend one’s view by means of constructive reasoning. It is also important to be able to formulate one’s opinion eloquently, clearly and comprehensibly, „*to put together a consistent text*“, as Honzin77 put it. It shows that one’s attractiveness can be boosted by well-developed rhetorical skills. High linguistic and stylistic skills seem to be essential traits in the virtual environment where most communication is carried out in form of written text.

Another factor that can play some part in increasing attractiveness is **self-disclosure**. Greater willingness to reveal rather intimate things about our lives online is probably associated with *disinhibition*, typical for virtual environment (Šmahel, 2003; Vybíral, 2002) and can also be understood as a compensation for the information we lack – we can’t see our partner, but knowing some intimate details can help us to overcome the tension that usually marks our communication with “a stranger“. Self-disclosure is also probably directly linked to the problem of anonymity on the Internet and Internet’s unreliability. For example, the users registered at www.rande.cz stated that their first impression of users who fill in their personal profile is much more positive than their view of those users, who don’t, because when the profile is not filled in, “...*you can be almost sure it’s someone’s fake ID... It’s not filled in, because you could notice the connection... And there are some other rules, like, for example, when there’s no information whatsoever given on children and marital status in the basic profile, although other fields have been filled in, then the person in question is married and has kids...*” (amadeo_x, 30, male). Such people cease to be perceived as trustworthy or reliable and that makes them less attractive.

Sense of humor can have a positive impact on one’s virtual attractiveness, to a certain extent. Although some respondents claimed that they preferred witty posts and messages (for example: “(I get interested) *if she posts something smart and humorous*” (Honzin77, 24, male), humor didn’t seem to be such a crucial factor. It is possible, that users realize how difficult it is to express humor through the medium of written text only – many jokes require face to face contact (gestures, intonation, etc.) and for that reason they do not assign that much significance to it.

On the Internet it seems necessary to be able to “play with words”, which requires some stylistic skills on author’s part as well as reader’s ability to notice and understand various puns and nuances in meaning. What seems to be crucial here is a certain level of empathy for a written text, or more precisely for a text written by a particular user. When someone is able to read between the lines and gets the precise meaning of our message, we will tend to

perceive him as more likeable. In such cases we presume that the said person is similar to us, thinks in similar ways or even that he or she perhaps likes us. The respondent Cesare mentioned this phenomenon when she explained how (and why) she became friends with another Internet user: “...like, say – Petr... His sense of humor is quite specific.” About the further development of their relationship she says: “When there’s some resonance between the two of you, you tend to get in touch more often and the more you get in touch, the more resonance there is.” (Cesare, 22, female.)

Two of our respondents mentioned a peculiar phenomenon we decided to label as “**virtual charisma**”. Honzin77 says: “...(I get impressed) when a woman shows some individuality. On this server it doesn’t show that much, but for example at libimseti.cz there is this woman who has become sort of a queen of the server...” (24, male). Or how Cesare put it: “It’s peculiar that even on the net there’s something like personal charm at work. I know about people who can be pretty ruthless and uncompromising, arrogant even – but they usually get away with it, even when they are being real assholes. People still respect them. Strange thing... But it exists.” (Cesare, 22, female).

We cannot yet tell much about what is this “virtual charisma” caused by, how it works or why some have it while others don’t. But it is likely that projection (which is very common in cyberspace) is an important element of this phenomenon. It is also possible that “virtual charisma” ensues from the combination of several earlier mentioned factors.

Apart from the traits that have positive effect on one’s virtual attractiveness, there are also some characteristics and patterns of behavior effect of which is exactly the opposite.

Passivity, for example, can be rather discouraging. Reasons for this were nicely summed up by amadeo_x, when he commented on blank personal profiles at the dating server www.rande.cz: “...When they’re passive, they just tick off several preset options, assuming that this should be enough... If they don’t know what to fill in - that also tells you something about their personality...:o) If they take no time to fill in their profile, it’s quite likely they’ll have no time for correspondence either...:o)” (30, male). On the Internet we cannot tell whether the other user is “present” or not and passivity can be interpreted as lack of interest. It is probably quite a common occurrence that people stare at the computer screen and wonder whether he or she “won’t respond, because s/he is not interested or because s/he doesn’t have any time”. Passivity of one correspondent increases the uncertainty on the other correspondent’s part. This decreases the attractiveness of the passive user in the other correspondent’s eyes.

Another quality that is usually considered unattractive is “**immoderate exhibitionism**”. One of the respondents used this expression when spoke about excessive using of colored fonts. She further added: “*Posts written in colored fonts are usually quite dumb. So I guess those people simply want attention and have no other means to attract attention than this.*” (Cesare, 22, female). It seems that interestingness has to have some limits. The respondents view “immoderate exhibitionism” as an attempt to disguise one’s mediocrity by drawing other people’s attention towards various superficial eccentricities, such as colored fonts or an eye-catching avatar: “*I don’t like it when someone flashes up his avatar (author’s note: fast switching of an original image with its negative that gives an impression of the image flashing), certainly not the best way to get my attention.*” (Replik, 25, male).

But the view of where mere interestingness ends and immoderate exhibitionism starts is without any doubt highly subjective.

Asocial behavior and aggressiveness were also mentioned in the interviews and were always referred to as repulsive. In the words of our respondents, unattractive are: “*...assholes and flammers who will do everything they can to piss off everyone else, just for the heck of it.*” (Cesare, 22, female) and people, who are: “*rude from the beginning, insult or humiliate you.*” (Flower, 19, female). This confirms that in forming and maintaining of relationships some personality traits and qualities can play an important part. People are more likely to look for partners who are kind, caring, tactful, sincere and intelligent, instead of aggressive, egoistic and insidious.

The respondents claimed that lack of erudition is unattractive (“*When they don’t know, what they’re going on about*”, Cesare.), as well as narrow-mindedness – as opposed to what we labeled as “intelligence”. Insufficient knowledge of grammar and inability to respond to context or to express one’s thoughts eloquently (as opposed to advanced language and communicative skills) are also seen as unattractive.

Discussion and Conclusion

Results of our research confirmed that becoming fond of another person is a result of various factors combined (Feldman, 1985). The analysis of interviews has proven the validity of some virtual attractiveness criteria as Patricia Wallace defined them (1999). One of these factors is the measure of self-disclosure. The significance of self-disclosure as an attractiveness-modifying factor can be associated with specific issues raised by the problem of anonymity in virtual environment. Another factor mentioned by Wallace is humor. Although it didn’t turn out to be that essential for our respondents, we can still consider humor as one of the relevant elements

of virtual attractiveness. As was already mentioned, the impact of humor in online communication is much larger in those cases, when there's a "resonance" between two correspondents, which is again linked with the factor of similarity. The great significance of similarity in the occurrence of inter-personal attractiveness has similar reasons in both real and virtual environment. One of the possible explanations is presented by Donn Byrne in his reinforcement-affect model (in Howitt, 1989). Byrne assumes, that those people who share our opinions and views "reward" us, for which we consider them more attractive. McQuillen (2003) states that our evaluation of a person we cannot see is based predominantly on noticing similarities, which corresponds with the outcome of our analysis. Moreover, the number of Internet users is huge and, according to Suler (2005), we sort them out by the range of interests they have in common with us. The fact that most discussion and chat servers are divided into thematic sections makes that/the process even easier.

Albright's (2001) hypotheses that the qualities which can be displayed by means of written text would gain greater importance were also confirmed. "Intelligence" and "linguistic and communicative skills" fall in that category. In online communication, these characteristics are rather well recognizable and they can serve as very useful clues in the process of forming one's opinion about another person.

Interestingness can draw attention to an Internet user, helping him or her to get noticed. Creativity is an essential part of our self-presentation which has turned out to be deeply wedded with attractiveness. The research has shown that user's nick and avatar can tell much about their owner. It is very likely that people have their reasons for choosing a particular nickname or icon. Our respondents realize this and they see nicks and icons as something they can refer to when they need to orientate themselves in the enormous and chaotic crowd of other Internet users. This confirms the hypotheses based on the research from "Children's Digital Media Center" (Subrahmanyam, Greenfield & Tynes, 2004), which claim that, in virtual environment, nick is the basic tool/means for displaying one's identity and that it, to a certain extent, compensates for the actual appearance of its owner (clothing, physiognomy, image). This theory can be applied to icons as well.

The presented research was above all an exploration probe of qualitative design and its results should not be generalized. In possible consequential researches various factors that modify attractiveness could be surveyed in greater detail. It might be also interesting to find out, if (and if yes, how) the perception of attractiveness differs depending on level of experience with online communication, or whether there are some differences associated with users' age and gender.

In such case it might be possible to use a quantitative research method (survey) and perhaps even experimental research design.

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