

INTERPERSONAL ATTRACTION

OVERVIEW OF ATTRACTION

MAIN IDEA

There are different types of attraction: physical, social, and task attraction. Judgments of physical attraction are almost instantaneous. Other elements of attractiveness are less immediately obvious, but through initial interactions that are positive, confirming, and competent, people can improve perceptions of their attractiveness.

Attraction has several dimensions including, but not necessarily limited to, social, physical, and task attraction (McCroskey & McCain, 1974).

1. **Physical attraction** includes seeing someone as sexy, good-looking, handsome, and/or pretty. It can include the beauty/attractiveness of a person's face and other physical attributes such as height, body shape, and athleticism. We do make very quick initial appraisals of other people when we meet them. For example, lab studies have found that we can assess physical attractiveness in as little as 100 milliseconds and that those determinations can trigger the physical attractiveness stereotype and related, positive attributions ([Locher et al., 1993](#)).

Beauty may be “in the eye of the beholder” and “only skin deep” but we associate many positive traits, such as sociability and competence, with being physically attractive as well. This is referred to as the “*beauty-is-good*” effect or the *physical attractiveness stereotype* and it has been confirmed in numerous academic studies ([Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991](#)). Indeed, both children and adults who are attractive are evaluated more positively by people, treated better by others, and demonstrate more positive traits ([Langlois et al., 2000](#)). Also, in keeping with conventional wisdom, men place more importance on physical attractiveness compared with women ([Feingold, 1990](#)).

Though research suggests that there are specific facial characteristics that people find attractive, such as youthfulness and facial symmetry with large eyes, high cheekbones, and a small nose, we also modify our appearance to make ourselves more attractive to others ([Regan, 2011](#)). For example, when women expect to meet someone who is physically attractive, they tend to wear more makeup. Also, when women are looking for a partner, they tend to wear particular types of clothing, such as more sheer, tighter, or more revealing clothing ([Grammer, Renninger, & Fischer, 2004](#)).

Whether or not intentionally modifying one's attractiveness is “deceptive” there are particular affordances online that people seem to take advantage of. For example, less attractive online daters tended to choose pictures of themselves for their profiles that are more attractive than they are in real life and they describe their physical attributes less honestly ([Toma & Hancock, 2010](#)).

2. **Social attraction** includes being someone that people would like to talk to, socialize with, and is fun or pleasant to be around. We see evidence of the importance of social attractiveness in online profiles where people describe themselves as “outgoing” and “fun-loving.” Social attraction also explains why extraversion is such a desirable trait, as extraverts tend to be sociable, outgoing, and have a wide circle of friends.

3. **Task attraction** includes whether or not people will help us get what we want, such as being reliable, dependable, and someone we would be able to work with. This is most often associated with workplace relationships and group relationships, but there is also a task element to some friendships and romantic relationships as well.

[Finkel and Eastwick \(2015\)](#) proposed an **instrumentality principle** in interpersonal attraction. They argued that we are attracted to people who help us fulfill our needs and achieve our goals, particularly if those needs and goals are a high priority. Further clarifying how needs and goals are at the heart of attraction, [Montoya and Horton \(2013\)](#) explained that we tend to seek relationship partners who are both *capable* of helping us achieve our goals and *willing* to help us. Think of it this way, if I want a successful career, it would be essential for me to find a partner a) that had the resources to help me pursue that career and b) who was willing to share those resources. The same can be true of any goal or need we have—wanting marriage, children, financial security and/or wealth, to live a certain lifestyle, to have particular freedoms, and so on—the partners we choose will either help or hinder us in achieving those important life goals.

McCroskey and McCain's (1974) measures of interpersonal attraction (summarized):	
Social Attraction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This person could be a friend • I could have a friendly chat with this person • This person would fit into my social circles • This person would be difficult to meet and talk to* • I could not have a personal friendship with this person* • This person is pleasant to be around
Physical Attraction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This person is very handsome or pretty • This person is somewhat ugly* • This person is sexy • This person is attractive physically • I like the way this person looks • This person isn't good-looking
Task Attraction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This person goofs off when they have a job to do* • I can count on this person getting the job done • I am confident that this person is able to get the job done • I could depend on this person if I wanted to get things done • I could not accomplish anything with this person • This person would not be good for me to work with

* denotes a reverse coded item.



PREDICTORS OF ATTRACTION

1. **Communication:** *People's conversational style, communication competence, and nonverbal immediacy behaviors affect social, physical, and task attraction.*

Conversational style, such as being animated, relaxed, and attentive during interactions, is related to increased perceptions of social and task attraction ([Brandt, 1979](#)). **Communication competence**, which we've discussed in previous chapters, also increases perceptions of social, task, and physical attractiveness, but the most pronounced effects of competence are on social and task attractiveness ([Duran & Kelly, 1988](#)). We tend to like interactions where the other person is empathic (responsive to the feelings of others), shows affinity toward us (nonverbal signals of liking), communicates supportively, and seems to be relaxed ([Wiemann, 1977](#)).

Thus, nonverbal immediacy may be important for increasing attraction (Houser, Horan, & Furler, 2008). **Immediacy** are those behaviors that bring us psychologically closer to someone, such as making eye contact, nodding our head in agreement, smiling, having an open and relaxed posture, and communicating in a positive, friendly, inclusive way. In sum, it involves seeming comfortable with and interested in the other person. Using verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors increase perceptions of a person's **perceived outcome value**, which is the perception of the rewards we could get from a prospective relationship.

Immediacy Behaviors that Promote Closeness (Anderson, 2009):

Verbal:

- Plural pronouns (we, us)
- Use of nicknames
- Open communication
- Positive statements about the person/relationship
- Compliments

Nonverbal:

- Eye contact
- Leaning in/moving closer
- Smiling
- Appropriate interpersonal touch

2. **Proximity:** *Physical and social proximity increase interpersonal attraction. We can increase proximity through communication.*

Proximity is closeness or similarity. It can include things like being close to someone physically (i.e., living on the same floor, or in the same neighborhood), but it also includes having similar goals and aspirations, similar socioeconomic status, and similar social circles.

There is evidence that links similarity and physical attractiveness, commonly known as the matching hypothesis. The **matching hypothesis** assumes that people select partners that are similar to themselves in terms of social and physical attractiveness (Walster et al., 1966). More recent research into online dating clarifies that people *try* to initiate relationships online with people who are more attractive than themselves but typically only get

responses from people who are similarly physically attractive ([Taylor, Fiore, Mendelsohn, & Cheshire, 2011](#)). Also, in terms of matching partners' popularity, people who were very popular connected with other people who were very popular, and unpopular people tended to connect with each other.



Insight into Innovation Activity: Check out this summary of Taylor et al.'s research on the matching hypothesis: <http://datascience.berkeley.edu/dating-matching-hypothesis/>. What do you think? Do people “match” others in terms of physical attractiveness and popularity? What other factors (or variables) may explain whether or not someone responds to an online profile?

Thus, **similarity** is a very early determinant of attraction. Some evidence suggests that when we perceive that we are *generally* similar to another person (i.e., when you perceive that you “have a lot in common” and that you “have similar personalities”), it can lead to romantic attraction. Interestingly, *actual* personality similarity is not necessarily related to attraction ([Tidwell, Eastwick, & Finkel, 2013](#)). Further, as relationships progress, similarity decreases in importance to the point that being similar to your long-term friends and romantic partners may not be important later in the relationship ([Sunnafrank, 1985](#)). Rather, as we will discuss in later chapters, how you and your partner navigate your differences over time is more important than your differences.

Physical proximity is how close a person is to you, and it is a slower, longer-term source of attraction. When you can see and interact with another person more often, you tend to gradually find him or her more attractive. Think about it this way, it is difficult to know if a person might be socially attractive or be instrumentally important if you don't get to know them. The best way to get to know someone is to see and interact with him or her often. Thus, over time, you may find that someone is more attractive than your initial appraisal of their physical attractiveness. Also, if a person is close to you—in the same classes you take, in the same neighborhood or social circle, and so on—then you probably have a lot in common, which can lead to attraction. Absence does not make the heart grow fonder, at least not in terms of attraction.



METHODS IN ATTRACTION RESEARCH

Attraction research is typically quantitative and employs surveys, experiments and, increasingly, big data collected from people's online activities. In my experience teaching attraction research, people are often skeptical that statistics can be used to describe and predict attraction, and are even more skeptical that we can use it to describe and predict love. Though feelings are intuitively qualitative because they seem like they should be unique to each one of us, there are testable and observable patterns in human interactions that can help us understand how and why people choose romantic partners and friends.

For example, the dimensions of attraction at the beginning of the chapter are based on McCroskey and McCain's (1974) work developing a scale measure of attraction. Based on the literature, they contended that there were more dimensions to attraction than just physical attraction, which had, up to that point, been the dominant focus of research. Their development of the attractiveness scale provided a convenient, useful pretest and posttest for experiments that manipulate variables like sociability, immediacy, disclosure, and physical attractiveness to see how those changes affect perceived attractiveness.

If we think of this in terms of a field experiment, we can also see how those measures can be (and have been) very useful. For example, researchers can use those scale items to assess people's perceptions of individuals in online dating profiles, or people who met during a speed dating event, to explore how different types of attraction vary based on the communication that occurs between people and the extent that different types of attraction are related to seeking a second date. Even in terms of social networks, understanding the types of attraction that draw people together could be informative in terms of predicting which friend requests we send out, which people we unfriend as we get to know them, and how our perceptions of their attractiveness may change.



Insight into Innovation Example: Using Math to Explain Romantic Attraction. Mathematician Hannah Fry uses data from dating websites to explore interpersonal relationships. After analysis of the profiles that people responded to, she concludes that physical attractiveness doesn't predict popularity on dating websites. Rather, being perceived as attractive by some people but *not everybody* makes it more likely that people will respond to an online dating profile. You can watch Hannah Fry's Ted Talk on using math to find and maintain romantic relationships here: https://www.ted.com/talks/hannah_fry_the_mathematics_of_love?language=en

Can finding love boil down to finding optimal mathematical patterns? What do big data research projects such as hers teach us about the usefulness of research in our personal lives?

In addition to scale items that can help us understand people's attraction to prospective friends and romantic partners, we can also observe initial interactions in new ways online. By looking at the most and least popular profiles on social networks and dating sites as indicated by likes, shares, comments, and responses, we can collect data on the people who are most and least attractive: What types of images do they use? What type of language do they use? To what extent are they interactive? Immediate? We can use big data to confirm or to update our understanding of the most effective communication styles, immediacy behaviors, and self-presentation tactics in social and romantic profiles.



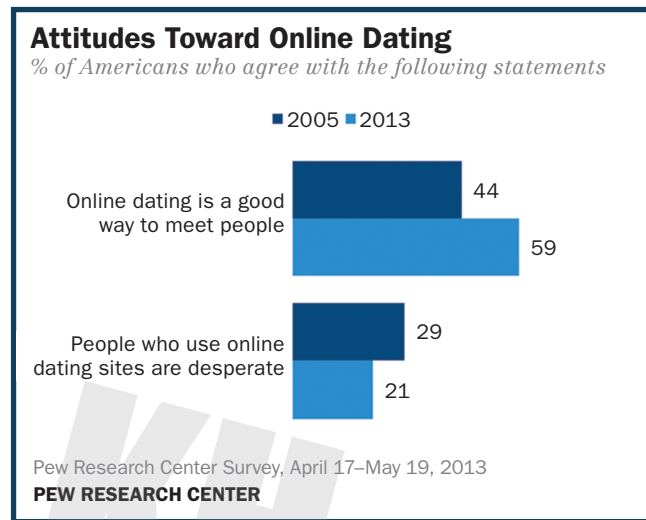
BECOMING ATTRACTIVE: ELECTRONIC PROPINQUITY

Electronic propinquity theory has been proposed to explain how mediated channels can be used to make us feel closer to people. In general, it proposes that mediated channels can create a sense of closeness between people when those channels 1) create a sense of *presence* between interactants, 2) allow for sharing and *interacting*, and are 3) used *competently* by interactants (Korzenny, 1978). On the other hand, closeness is reduced by the presence of *complex* information, *rules*, and feeling like one has too many channel *options*.

[Walther and Bazarova \(2008\)](#) pointed out that this particular theory hasn't been widely researched, which is unfortunate since it seems like it would apply well to Web 2.0 technologies such as social networks and dating sites. Walther and Bazarova confirmed some of the assumptions of the theory in an experiment. They found that communication competence did increase propinquity, particularly in situations where the channels limited interactants, though even highly skilled communicators were not able to overcome the hurdles of a highly complex task via a low-quality channel. Also, the introduction of more communication channels decreased a sense of closeness.

So, what does this tell us about interpersonal attraction and Web 2.0 technologies? Creating a feeling of closeness with people through mediated channels may not be as straightforward as simply being a competent and immediate communicator, though that does help. Interpersonal attraction may also be affected by the features of the specific channel or software we use.

Online Dating. Pew (2015) reported that almost 60 percent of American adults have positive attitudes toward using online dating to meet people.



“5 facts about online dating,” Pew Research Center, Washington, DC (April, 2015) <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/20/5-facts-about-online-dating/>

Take, for example, Tinder. According to [comScore \(2014\)](#), 35 to 40 million people use online dating technologies, with mobile and social media apps like Tinder leading the pack. Taking what we know about attraction and electronic propinquity and applying it to dating in the Web 2.0 environment, we can get useful insight into the popularity of Tinder. Users are shown a picture of a potential match and a brief bio, and immediately swipe left for people they aren’t interested in and swipe right for people they like. The interface is simple and a surprisingly intuitive design; thus electronic propinquity theory suggests that it would be ideal for increasing closeness. In addition, prospective matches on Tinder are geographically close, which may increase propinquity. If two people both swipe right on each other’s profiles, it is a “match” and they can message each other through the Tinder app. This early interaction can help two people determine if they might have a lot in common, such as similar goals, interests, and needs.



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Learn more about why we “swipe right” to indicate liking and “swipe left” to indicate less liking in this interesting post from cognitive scientist, Jim Davies: <http://nautil.us/blog/why-tinder-charmers-and-movie-heroes-move-the-same-way>

FRIENDSHIP: SOCIAL CAPITAL (AND ATTRACTIVENESS) ON FACEBOOK AND TWITTER

We can think about social networking sites as large, online *communities* where people’s interactions follow a general pattern, they engage in social rituals, they form a sense of belonging, and they see the network as a community ([Parks, 2011](#)). There is evidence that propinquity is the

primary determinant of who we friend and maintain friendships with via social networks, further supporting the notion that social networks are a type of community where we maintain ties with people who are similar to ourselves ([Lewis, Gonzalez, & Kaufman, 2012](#)).

As a community, social networks are a way for people to build **social capital**. Social capital is the number and strength of a person's social connections within a community ([Putnam, 2000](#)). Social capital benefits *both* the person who has the connection via a social network and the people closely connected to that person. Thus, people who have a lot of social capital via social networks like Twitter and Facebook tend to be attractive to us: they can help us build our own social networks and capital (social attractiveness) and be useful to us in terms of professional networking and helping us find useful resources (task attractiveness).

Social capital is affected by social network features in several ways ([Tong et al., 2008](#)). First, our own profile pictures and posts can enhance perceptions of our social and physical attractiveness. Also, the connections we make via social networks can enhance perceptions of our attractiveness. Having physically attractive friends on social networks can improve people's assessments of our own physical attractiveness. And, lastly, having a lot of friends, but not too many friends, also increases perceptions of our social attractiveness.

Social attraction leads to increased disclosure which, as we will discuss in the next chapter, is a key aspect of building close interpersonal relationships ([Sheldon, 2009](#)). Disclosure and ongoing online interactions then build *more* social attraction ([Antheunis, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2010](#)). In all, building social capital through online communities like social networks can make us more attractive to other people, which will lead to more close ties and the expansion of social networks, and thus build our social capital and attractiveness even more.



Insight into Innovation Example: Are Your Facebook Friends More Socially Attractive Than You Are? The **friendship paradox** is the finding that, on average, your friends have more friends than you do ([MIT Technology Review, 2014](#)). So, if you went to Facebook and looked at the number of friends you have, then calculated the average number of friends among your friends, your Facebook friends would have more friends than you do.

There's an interesting mathematical explanation of why our Facebook friends are more popular (i.e., socially attractive) than we are. Facebook users who have a lot of friends on social networks a) are more likely to be your friend because they're friends with so many people; therefore, b) your popular friends increase the overall average of number friends among your connections. So, yes, your friends are on average more socially attractive than you are, and the research also suggests that they are happier and wealthier too. Thus, your friends have more social capital than you do, but being connected to those popular people also builds your own social capital via social networks.

CONCLUSION

Though there is no one unified theory of attractiveness, we have gone over several well-established concepts from psychology, sociology, and communication studies. Taken together, these fields of research do point to specific types of attraction, predictors of attraction, and outcomes associated with attractiveness.

Specifically, people vary in physical, social, and task attractiveness. Judgments of physical attractiveness are almost instantaneous, but through face-to-face and/or online communication, we can promote perceptions of our social and task attractiveness. These types of attraction require a certain amount of propinquity—geographic proximity, overlapping social networks, or mediated means of becoming close—so that we can meet and interact. Through these initial interactions, we can communicate immediacy, similarity, and demonstrate our value as a friend or romantic partner. These connections that we make may then lead to even more connections and increased attractiveness.

There is, of course, a lot more to be done in terms of research and theorizing about interpersonal attraction. In some ways, the explanations of attractiveness discussed here are offering conflicting advice: physical attractiveness research suggests that beauty is essential, the instrumentality principle suggests that social or material rewards are essential, and propinquity research contends that closeness and similarity are essential. Overall, I take this to mean that we can enhance our attractiveness by being valuable to others (i.e., through social capital and resources) and increasing our closeness to others (i.e., by finding points of similarity, communicating closeness, and using technologies that enable closeness). This makes some intuitive sense as we look at the popular social media sites and dating apps: popular and attractive people on social networks are valuable connections to have and maintain, technology helps us find points of similarity, makes us feel closer to people, and it is easy to use social networks to maintain those connections. Subsequent research on attraction, particularly how attraction changes as we interact via social network sites and dating apps, could help us move toward a clearer theory about how and why we are attracted to others (or not) online.

ASSIGNMENTS

1. **Compare and contrast dating websites/apps.** Look at the features of two competing dating websites or apps. Compare and contrast the features of the websites/apps in terms of the types of attraction emphasized and deemphasized by the features of app and the types of profile content permitted:
 - a. Does the website or app link people together based on *similarity*? How?
 - b. Does the website or app link people together based on *proximity*? How?
 - c. Does the website or app focus on users' *physical attractiveness*? How?
 - d. Does the website or app allow users to demonstrate their *communication competence* and create *immediacy*? How?
 - e. Overall, which website or app best meets the criteria for *electronic propinquity*? How so?
2. **Evaluate social capital on Twitter.** Check out the Twitter pages for some of the most popular celebrities (i.e., Katy Perry, Justin Bieber, Taylor Swift, Lady Gaga, etc.).
 - a. Looking at their posts, how did they develop their social capital? For example, do their posts highlight their physical attractiveness, express similarity to followers, seem immediate and conversational, highlight their instrumentality to followers, and so on?
 - b. What can we learn about building and maintaining social capital by looking at how they use Twitter?

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