

# The Formation of Interpersonal Attraction and Intimate Relationships on Internet Relay Chat

## An Exploratory Study

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*This research investigated the formation of interpersonal attraction and intimate relationships on Internet Relay Chat (IRC). Two methods were employed: survey and in-depth interview. Purposive and convenience sampling were used for both methods. Results revealed that the formation of in-person and online interpersonal attraction and intimate relationships have similar initial stages of development. For online relationships however, partners have to undergo processes to shift from online to in-person. It was also shown that similar attraction cues were important online and in-person. A closer examination, however, showed that these attraction cues differ in salience and quality. This study contributes to the understanding of the impact of computer-mediated communication, particularly IRC, on the development of intimate relationships.*

The advent of computer-mediated communication (CMC) via the Internet, is believed to have significant implications on various aspects of human endeavor. People are not only meeting and interacting through the Internet; they are forming meaningful relationships as well. According to an article in *Newsweek* magazine, the phenomenon of online relationships is growing at a fast rate that it now warrants serious attention (Stone 2001). In the Philippines, online romantic relationships are already slowly entering the cultural mainstream through Internet

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relay chat (IRC), one form of CMC. IRC has become a popular venue for the development of online relationships (Paña 2000). It is, therefore, crucial to investigate and understand relationships that develop through this medium early on. This research was done to explore the formation of interpersonal attraction and intimate relationships on Internet Relay Chat (IRC).

## **INTERPERSONAL ATTRACTION AND INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS**

Interpersonal attraction is an individual's desire to be with an other (Franzoi 1996). In a lifetime, we get attracted to several people, but definitely not to everyone we meet. There are several factors that determine whom we get attracted to and how strong our attractions are. Based on previous studies, attraction cues may be based on the characteristics and behaviors of the persons involved in the interaction. They include physical attractiveness (e.g., Dion, Berscheid and Walster 1972; Aronson et al. 1994; Franzoi 1996; Cowley 1996), perceived and/or actual similarities (e.g., Aronson et al. 1994; Berscheid and Hatfield 1974 cited in Coats and Feldman 1996; Franzoi 1996; Duck 1998), and reciprocity (e.g., Aronson et al. 1994; Franzoi 1996).

There are also attraction cues associated with the characteristics of the situation where the two people interact. These are proximity (Franzoi 1996; Aronson et al. 1994), familiarity and propinquity effects (e.g., Zajonc 1968), emotional arousal induced by the situation (e.g., Walster and Berscheid 1971); and a new or unusual situation (Ickes and Duck 2000). These attraction cues facilitate the initiation of interaction and the establishment of an intimate relationship (Duck 1998).

When we are attracted to a certain person, we engage that person in a communication process. Through an open communication process, intimacy develops. Communication paves the way for self-disclosure. Two people reveal themselves to each other experientially, emotionally, and/or physically which reduces uncertainties in the interaction (Hinde

1996). The couple then starts sharing in most information resulting to intimacy in the relationship (Sternberg 1986; Franzoi 1996).

Knapp and Vangelisti (1996) elucidated the communication process by citing various interaction stages that people go through to establish an intimate relationship. First is the *initiating stage*. At this stage, attraction cues operate in our decision to approach someone. The next stage is *experimenting* wherein people try to discover things about each other. It usually starts with the exchange of demographic information, followed by cultural information, then social information, and lastly, psychological information. Such information functions as selection criteria for the next stage. In the succeeding *intensifying stage*, the amount of personal disclosures increases. Then, the relationship reaches the point wherein one starts blending his or her personality with the other. This is the *integrating stage*. The last stage is the *bonding stage*, a public ritual that announces to everyone that commitments have been formally made. This usually involves the institutionalization of the romantic relationship. Thus, communication plays a very crucial role in the formation of relationships. It is believed to be the essence of intimate relationships (Hinde 1996).

The label "intimate relationship" is inclusive of both friendship and romantic relationships. Sternberg (1986) provides a framework, the triangular theory of liking and loving, to distinguish the two forms of relationship. This theory involves the concept of a triangle with the vertices representing three important components of a relationship: intimacy, passion, and commitment. Intimacy is the emotional aspect of the relationship which includes feelings that promote closeness, bondedness, and connectedness. The second component, passion, involves the sexual aspect and related motivational needs. Commitment is the third component, and this consists of two aspects: the decision that one loves a certain other (a short-term aspect) and the commitment to maintain that love over time (a long-term aspect). These three components interact, such that sizes of the vertices of a triangle vary in

relation to one another. The concept of a triangle that changes size and shape gives us an idea of having different types of relationships. Sternberg (1986) came up with eight types depending on which component/s is/are dominant (i.e., nonlove, liking, infatuated love, empty love, romantic love, companionate love, fatuous love, and consummate love). For instance, liking is different from romantic love because the dominant component in liking is intimacy, whereas in romantic love, the dominant components are intimacy and passion. In fatuous love, the dominant components are passion and commitment. Consummate love is a relationship where the three components exist equally. This research makes use of Sternberg's theory to differentiate the two types of intimate relationships: *friendship* (where the dominant component is intimacy) and *romantic relationship* (where the dominant component is passion, combined with either intimacy or commitment or both). Thus, a romantic relationship could be romantic love, fatuous love, or consummate love based on Sternberg's classification.

Since romantic love could lead to a life-long commitment, it is vital to understand the basis of selection of people for potential mates. Socioevolutionary theory asserts that human beings' innate evolutionary mechanisms guide the selection of potential mates (Wright 1995). Romantic relationships are seen as having two primary adaptive functions: for sexual reproduction and for bonding for the care of offspring (Ickes and Duck 2000). Because of the differences in reproductive resources, males and females have differential investment when they get into a relationship. The difference in investment results to males and females having different selection criteria for potential mates. Males tend to look for characteristics in females that signal reproductive capability. "Attractive" women are those who possess characteristics that signal youth and health. Females, on the other hand, look for men who are capable of sustaining and supporting the offspring. The qualities females look for in a potential mate are related to a man's wealth or social status

and security (Buss and Barnes 1986; Howard, Blumstein, and Schwartz 1987; Sprecher, Sullivan, and Hatfield 1994; Wright 1995; Ickes and Duck 2000; Berry and Miller 2001).

It is important to note that many of the concepts and theories on interpersonal attraction and intimate relationships are based on research involving heterosexual couples (Franzoi 1996; Muscarella 1999). This research is another work which focuses on heterosexual relationships. There is also a need to underscore the fact that knowledge about attraction and relationship is largely anchored on studies concerning interactions that occur in-person. There is recognition that current theories and assumptions on interpersonal relationship might not be able to explain and capture the essence of online interactions (Jones 1995; Loader 1997). For Parks and Floyd (1996), online relationships challenge existing theories about the development of interpersonal relationships. Thus, this research hopes to contribute to the literature by investigating how established theories on interpersonal attraction and intimate relationships hold in an online context.

### **ONLINE INTERACTION BASED ON COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION AND INTERNET RELAY CHAT**

The Internet, which is the convergence of computers and telecommunications, has led to a new medium for communication called *computer-mediated communication* (CMC). There are two distinct classifications of CMC: asynchronous and synchronous (Byrne 1994; Riva and Galimberti 1997; Suler 1999; December 1993). Asynchronous CMC is produced when communication is not simultaneous (Riva and Galimberti 1997); that is, people need not interact with each other at that moment (e.g., email and bulletin board systems/fora) (Suler 1999). Synchronous CMC, on the contrary, is produced when communication occurs simultaneously between two or more users (Riva and Galimberti 1997; Suler 1999).

Internet Relay Chat (IRC) is a synchronous, multi-user type of computer-mediated communication (Hentschel 1998; Troest 1998; Byrne 1994). It is used largely for social interaction, and no physical contact between users (either prior to or after communication) is necessary (Reid 1991). The users of IRC are commonly called "chatters". A chatter may be engaged in a number of conversations at once. He or she can have virtually as many conversations, private or public (mainroom/chatroom), as he or she can handle. Chatrooms are created by users and they are identified through a label that briefly describes the nature of the room. Usually, chatroom names are based on geographical location (e.g., #manila), interest or activity (e.g., #kulitan), or social category (e.g., #up). Also, chatters can create (and re-create) their identities by choosing a name ("nick") when they log on. It is not unusual for chatters to choose a nick that describes them. According to Danet and colleagues (1996), the nick is an online "plumage" that generally reflects some aspect of the user's personality or interests. It is also common for users to prefer and consistently use one nick, thereby establishing an online identity (Reid 1991).

### **ONLINE INTERPERSONAL ATTRACTION AND INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS**

Based on initial studies on online interactions, several theories have been postulated to explain how individuals process information about other people and how they present themselves during online interactions. These theories provide insights on the quality and processes of intimate relationships online. One of these theories is the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) by Postmes, Spears, and Lea (1998). According to this theory, when there are limited cues, instead of defining the situation in interpersonal terms, the self and the other are more likely to be included in a shared social category. There is a focus on shared similarity rather than difference. Attraction is heightened for a perceived similar other. Therefore, the predicted effect of limited cues and anonymity is to foster a sense of cohesion and

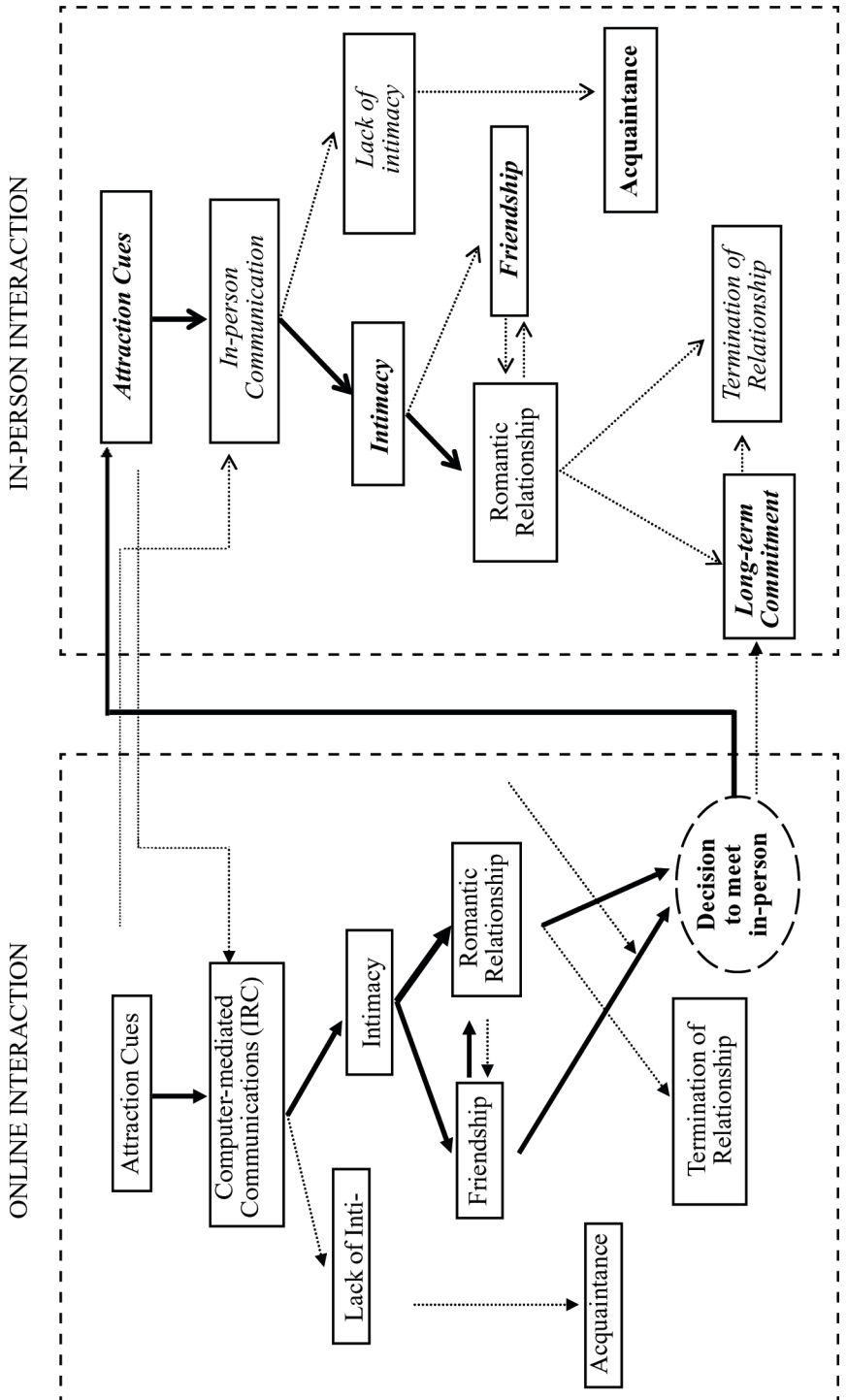
attachment between or among the people who interact, making CMC a highly socially engaging medium.

Stone (1992 cited in Hamman 1996) shares the same idea that the very few cues online heighten attraction towards an other. The limited cues online necessitate the user's interpretive facilities. This leads to filling in of missing information with idealized information. Therefore, it is likely that people base their evaluation of the other on an 'idealized' perception which heightens attraction (Hamman 1996; Kim 2000; Clay 2000).

Walther's Hyperpersonal CMC perspective and its predecessor, Social Information Processing (SIP) theory, provide additional explanations (Walther 1997). SIP theory states that individuals take advantage of the system in CMC to send and receive information, develop impressions and foster relationships. The Hyperpersonal perspective extends this by stating that the unique characteristics of CMC allow users to achieve more favorable impressions and greater levels of intimacy than those in face-to-face communication (Walther 1997). Users take advantage of the limitations of CMC to mask cues that they find undesirable or less controllable. Instead, they focus on presenting self-revealing cues and indicators in a preferred and intentional manner. Users make use of CMC's unique characteristics for editing and off-line processing to present the self in a more desirable way. Thus, the reciprocal interactions of selectively self-presented messages and affectively idealized perceptions provide intensification of these processes through behavioral confirmation. This is the reason why the resulting highly intense relationship could be based on 'fantasy' or idealization (Kim 2000).

Specifically on IRC, several factors have been found to be salient in the formation of interpersonal attraction. According to Byrne (1994), readily observable elements such as the chatters' nick and the channels where they chat are important attraction cues. Aside from these, Reid (1991) has observed that chatters choose their chatmates based on speed

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework





of response, wit and ingenuity. Cognitive processing could be misrepresented by the person's typing prowess or his/her server's capability. A person who takes time to respond, types slowly, or has a slow server or computer could be judged unattractive. In a study done among Filipino chatters, the nick and the *age, sex, and location* (ASL) information serve as attraction cues (Oñate and Sison 2000). Chatters prefer nicks that are unique (catch attention) or common (sound familiar); and nicks that are indicative of the chatter's gender (masculine- or feminine-sounding). Also, chatters prefer those who belong to the same age group as them and those who live near them. Aside from ASL, Oñate and Sison (2000) also observed that the way a chatter carries conversations is a major attraction cue. Someone who is perceived to be intelligent and pleasant is attractive. Gender differences in chatmate selection were observed among Filipino chatters in the study of Paña (2000). Females were found to be more inclined to establish a relationship with a male chatter who seemed smart and intelligent. Males, on the other hand, tried to establish a relationship with a physically attractive female chatter. Seeing the picture or meeting in person was a prerequisite.

Based on the studies mentioned, the attraction cues in online interactions that are similar to that of in-person interactions are perceived similarity (based on SIDE theory), actual similarity of demographic characteristics (Oñate & Sison 2000), and reciprocity (Hyperpersonal Perspective). Proximity and propinquity effects also matter and function in such a way that those who are in the same network and channel are more likely to meet and interact (Byrne 1994). Also, meeting and conversing on IRC (which could be coded as novel and 'unusual') intensify attraction. Physical attractiveness becomes salient (especially among males) after the couples have exchanged pictures or have met in person (Paña 2000).

The conceptual framework (see Figure 1) presents how an online romantic relationship develops vis-à-vis an in-person relationship. The

development of in-person relationships is shown to proceed in a manner that is consistent with the literature on in-person relationships. The boxes were traced using broken lines to show the permeability of online and in-person contexts. The process connected by dark, solid arrows (➔) is the focus of this study. The formation of online relationships is hypothesized to approximate the development of *in-person* relationships.

## **METHOD**

This research made use of two methods: survey-questionnaire and in-depth interview. Purposive and convenience sampling were used for both methods. A survey (n = 133) using a researcher-constructed questionnaire was conducted (both paper-and-pencil and online forms) to determine possible participants for in-depth interview (n = 12; six males and six females).

### **Instruments and Procedure**

A survey-questionnaire consisting of closed- and open-ended items was designed to find out the range of characteristics, behaviors, attitudes, perceptions, motivations, and experiences on chatting and online attraction and relationships of Filipino IRC chatters. Survey respondents were recruited online (through chat on IRC) and in-person (through referrals and in eyeballs or chatters' meetings). They were made to choose between a paper version and an online version (<http://www.upd.edu.ph/~kssp/psych/chei>). Survey respondents who met the criteria for the interview were contacted (through email and/or phone call) and were asked to participate in an in-depth interview. They were informed about the content of the interview and were told that it would entail meeting the researcher in person. The researcher was properly identified and the potential interviewees were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Those who agreed to be interviewed were, then, met in person by the researcher. Each interview was done during the time and in the place set by the participant. The interview was semi-structured such that questions not included in the interview

schedule were asked if necessary. The interview schedule consisted of questions about experiences on interpersonal attraction and romantic relationships. On the average, the interview process lasted for two hours.

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. The researcher checked the transcriptions for accuracy before they were given to six independent judges (3 males, 3 females) for analysis. Each judge was given two interviews (sex of judge and participant similar) to analyze. Concurrently, the researcher did an independent analysis of all the interviews. The task of the researcher and the judges was to cull themes that were relevant to the formation of online interpersonal attraction and romantic relationships. Integration of the individual analyses of the researcher and the judges was done by the researcher to come up with the major themes. The researcher met with the judges to discuss the themes. A summary of the themes was given to the participants for validation purposes.

## **Participants**

There were 133 respondents for the survey. The mean age of the respondents was 23.55, with a range of 17 to 38 years old. The distribution of participants by questionnaire type (online vs. paper), sex (male vs. female) and age group (16-19, 20-24, 25-29 and 30-above) is shown below (Table 1).

Twelve survey respondents were selected to be interviewees based on three major variables: sex, age group (16 to 19, 20 to 24, and 25 to 29 years old) and status of relationship (past, current). The status of relationship criterion was included to see if there would be differences in perception of participants about their experience if the relationship is ongoing or not. However, it was difficult to find participants who had pure relationships (i.e., only had one past or one current online romantic relationship), especially for the past criterion. It appears that those who have experienced having an online romantic relationship are more likely to engage in it again. This resulted in 23 different experiences of online relationships from the 12 participants.

TABLE 1. Distribution of participants by questionnaire type, sex and age group.

## RESULTS

### **The Participants and Their Online Romantic Partners**

Of the 23 relationships, twelve were reported by the female participants and eleven by the male participants. Eight of these relationships were ongoing (*current*). One female participant reported two simultaneous *current* online romantic relationships. The average age of the participants was 23. For both current and past, the average age of female partners was 23 whereas the average age of male partners was 27. Females tended to choose older romantic partners, while only a couple of males had romantic partners older than them (one of them younger than his partner by only a year). Ten of the participants were single. One female participant was married and another female participant was separated.

### **Descriptions of the Online Romantic Relationships**

Sixteen of these relationships were of couples who were geographically near each other (e.g., both from Metro Manila). On the other hand, seven relationships were of couples far from each other. The participants were from Metro Manila while the partners were in Palawan, the USA, Canada, and Australia. All these geographically disparate relationships were experienced by female participants (four current, four past).

Fourteen relationships became formally romantic online, while seven established “mutual understanding” (no formal commitment) online and became romantic partners formally in person. Formal meant that the two parties involved in the relationship made a commitment or a clear agreement about the status of their relationship (e.g., there was exclusivity).

There were three past online couples who had not met each other in-person at all. One female participant met her online partner in person but only after the termination of the romantic relationship. Among the current relationships, there were only three couples who had not met in person (two of these relationships simultaneous, i.e., relationships of one female participant). Thus, there were seven solely online relationships.

How long after their first chat did they become romantic partners? The time was estimated in terms of number of weeks. For past romantic relationships, the average number of weeks that the chatmates became romantic partners from the time they first chatted was approximately three weeks. As for ongoing relationships, male participants took a bit longer than female participants in formalizing their romantic relationships. The average for males was nine weeks while for females it was five weeks. Current relationships took longer to be formalized than past relationships. The shortest time that a couple became romantic partners from the time they first chatted was one week, while the longest was eight weeks.

How long do these relationships last? For past relationships, females reported relationships which averaged about 11 weeks (approximately three months) while males' relationships lasted for an average of almost eight weeks. The shortest length of a past relationship was four weeks, including "mutual understanding stage", while the longest was 40 weeks. As for current relationships, the relationships had been ongoing on the average of ten weeks for females. For males, the relationships have been going on from four weeks (shortest) to two to three years (longest).

### **The Formation of Online Intimate Relationships**

Based on the stories shared by the participants, common themes emerged and they were arranged in five developmental stages. These stages comprise the process by which online interpersonal attraction and romantic relationships proceed.

*Stage 1: The use of attraction cues in online interactions.* The most salient feature of this stage is the selection of chatmates. The participants made use of several attraction cues to initiate chat with someone. First among these cues were age and sex. Unlike in in-person interactions where basic demographic characteristics such as age and sex are inferred based on physical appearance, online interactions were devoid of such cues. Participants, then, relied on the nick for cues or they directly asked the other chatter (e.g. "asl please" to ask for "age, sex, location"). Male participants explicitly expressed their preference for a female chatmate. In terms of age, male participants tended to have female chatmates who were almost as old as them or younger. Female participants, on the other hand, preferred male chatmates who were slightly older than them.

The construed attractiveness of a chatter is also a major factor for the initiation of interaction. Online, attractiveness is established not by physical characteristics but through selective self-presentation. The nick was the most conspicuous cue. Participants selected their chatmates based on the attractiveness of the nick. According to the participants, they choose a nick on the bases of uniqueness and

simplicity and if the nick manifests “wit and intelligence”. Males, in particular, select nicks that sound feminine and elusive. A male participant shared:

“Mga tipong, kunyari ‘suplada’, ganyan ganyan. Gusto ko yung medyo may challenge kausapin.”

Aside from the nick, self-presentation online includes self-description and chat behaviors. What participants usually did is to observe the exchange in the main room. The traits participants used to describe themselves (e.g., “smart and witty”) and the manner by which they interact with others were seen as indicative of their personality characteristics, abilities, motives and attitudes. These became the bases of being noticed and selected by other chatters.

Like in in-person interaction, perceived and actual similarity cues influence strongly online. On IRC, participants tended to click on nicks that indicated interests, characteristics, and motives similar to their own. Participants also approached people they perceived as similar to themselves based on that person’s contributions to the conversation in the main room. Similarity facilitated interaction because it provided a common ground for two people who know nothing about each other. It gave two people a “reason” to interact (e.g., “wala lang, mahilig siya sa Red Horse, mahilig din ako sa Red Horse beer”). Moreover, being in the same chatroom already served as a cue for similarity. This may have implied that the chatters have the same interests or they belong to the same social category.

Proximity on IRC has something to do with being online at the same time and logging on the same chatroom. The participants met their online romantic partner in the chatrooms where they regularly chat. It was found that regulars of the same chatroom who log on at the same time were more likely to meet and interact. They were also the ones who see each others’ nicks most of the time. It was also found that mere familiarity with the nick makes the owner attractive, even without prior meaningful interaction.

Overlapping social circles or having common friends also figured as an attraction cue. This cue increases the probability of meeting by having a middle person to introduce two chatters. This common friend could be someone they met online or somebody they already know in person. Also, the fact that the chatters both knew another person increases trust and sense of security. This made a person more open to an interaction. According to a female chatter:

“... kung ano mang background meron ‘tong taong’to, puwede kung itanong sa kanya [the common friend]. So parang may kakilala ako na kilala sya so parang safe ako.”

Having a common acquaintance or friend could be a similarity cue as well. It could facilitate initiation of interaction because it serves as an opening line for a conversation.

Online interaction was not totally devoid of physical attractiveness cues. The participants still found cues that would indicate actual or perceived physical attractiveness at the initiation stage of interaction. They inferred from the nick (e.g., nicks that pertain to physical characteristics) and self-description of a chatter. It was also common to get feedback from other chatmates about a chatter’s physical appearance (e.g., “Maganda daw”). Aside from these, there are websites where chatters can post their pictures. In fact, one technique of getting a chatmate was by announcing a website in the main room where one’s picture is posted. However, showing one’s picture at the start of the interaction was not common among the participants.

*Stage 2: The establishment of intimacy leading to friendship.* The defining feature of this stage is the development of friendship online. The establishment of intimacy is important to maintain regular interactions that could lead to an intimate relationship such as friendship. From the initial communication on IRC, there were factors that would determine whether or not the interaction would be sustained. One of these factors was similarity established on their first chat. In a relatively short time,



the participants seemed to establish affinity with their chatmate because of their perceived similarity with the other. Among the perceived similarities, their experience of a problematic relationship made one feel closer with the person. One female participant shared:

“Sabi niya sa akin nun, he was healing a broken heart din...From a rocky relationship, parang there’s somebody na makakaintindi sa kanya”

Aside from experiences, similarity of abilities also mattered:

“We seem to be on the same wavelength... Ano lang, wala kaming pinag-uusapan, witty lang. Yung smart-alecky banter”

Personality characteristics were also reasons why someone would want to chat with someone else again. Chatters approached someone who they thought possessed socially desirable traits. There were slight gender differences when it came to desired characteristics. Females tended to emphasize characteristics related to intelligence and abilities (e.g., smart/intelligent, witty/funny, confident, good conversationalist). Males, on the other hand, preferred characteristics related to being nurturing (e.g., sweet/“*malaming*”/caring, good listener, *mabait*). These choices are consistent with the idea that online interaction is not deprived of gender stereotypes (Stewart et al. 1999).

The quality of the initial interaction was also an important determinant on whether or not they would chat with a particular chatter again. As described by the participants, the striking quality of the initial chat to ensure that interaction would be sustained is whether “it was fun/enjoyable”.

*Stage 3: The intensification of attraction leading to a romantic relationship.* The salient feature of this stage is the intensification of intimacy which eventually leads to an online romantic relationship. Based on the descriptions of the participants, friendships and romantic relationships are qualitatively different. The elements that differentiate romantic relationship from friendship are passion and commitment. Passion

included feelings of affection (falling in love), expressions of affection (“I love you”), a sexual component and longing for the other (“think of the person”; “cybersex”). Commitment consisted of exclusivity (“boyfriend/girlfriend” label), public declaration of the relationship in the chatroom (“kami na”) and maintenance of relationship over time (regular chats and communication through other forms).

Since friendship requires fewer components, it is relatively easier to satisfy. All the participants reported having online friends. Most of the online romantic relationships started out as online friendships. Several important factors operate to change the nature of the relationship. As far as communication is concerned, certain factors such as exclusivity, regularity, and length of the interaction are important determinants for proceeding from friendship to romantic relationship. The participants noticed that they started having more regular and longer interactions with the chatter they were attracted to. Also, they noticed that they had started to focus on this chatmate. Once this particular chatmate went online, they abandoned their ongoing conversations and no longer entertained other invitations to chat. Good quality conversations, which increase one’s interest for further interactions with the online friend, were also necessary. According to one of the male participants:

“Kasi ang nangyayari, kaya nagcha-chat ka, kadalasan kong natatandaan, kung sino yung mas makuwento yun yung palagi kung kinaka-usap. So siguro yung first chat namin makuwento siya and marami kaming napag-usapan.”

A high level of disclosure was considered important in intensifying intimacy between two chatters. The participants perceived their disclosure as much faster online than in person. What is striking is that the disclosure process was actually accelerated. According to Knapp and Vangelisti (1996), people go through interaction stages (initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating and bonding) to establish an intimate relationship. The same trend was seen in this research and the

first four stages occurred after at least two instances of chat interaction, often with less than a day interval. Each stage happened at a fast rate. One participant's experience showed that a single chat session was enough to reach the stage of integrating.

Other factors observed that contribute to the shift from friendship to romantic relationship are attention and the efforts that chatters put into the relationship. According to one female participant:

"...he would stay up as late as 4am his time, just to continue talking to me. Tapos minsan pa until I am about to leave the office, online pa. Tapos he would come online na naman when I'm home na, kasi normally I would go online at 9 at night, so that would give him more or less about 4 hours of sleep lang."

When one gives attention, it increases the other's feeling of being special. This could make the other do the same. Reciprocity results from these displays of affection.

Relationships facilitated by IRC were generally not exclusive online. For the participants, other forms of communication were present in their relationships, such as sending emails and texts (short messaging system or SMS), instant messaging (e.g., Yahoo and ICQ) and talking on the phone. Thus, chatters were connected to each other in many ways. Having multiple venues of interaction increased disclosure and intimacy.

Validation of the other person's existence became a necessity as involvement in the relationship increased. There were several ways that chatters used to validate their existence including sending photographs. Pictures did not only function as a physical attractiveness cue but it validated one's existence or realness as well. A female participant shared:

"So sabi ko, "you send me your pics kung talagang totoo ka." Nagsend siya ng pic sa akin hindi ko lang ma-open. So sabi ko "ok fine" medyo naniniwala na ako".

Expressions of affection (e.g., terms of endearment, verbalization of affection, verbalization of the physical aspects of relationships

often in the form of online kisses and cybersex) were also coming into the picture as a relationship proceeded from purely friendship to romantic.

It would be erroneous to say that physical attractiveness no longer plays a role in online relationships because of the lack of physical cues on IRC. It was found that physical attractiveness still had an influence. Physical attractiveness intensified the attraction between couples. However, its role is not as direct and apparent like in in-person interaction. Online, the participants inferred physical attractiveness through cues such as the nick and self-description. A more direct physical attractiveness cue would be a picture sent by a chatter, but it was not common for the participants to send their picture to someone they had just met.

Commitment marked the shift from friendship to romantic relationship. Commitment is the formal agreement between two people to enter a romantic relationship. It was common among the participants to have some sort of transition stage. Prior to actual commitment, several relationships went through the "mutual understanding stage" or MU. This is the knowledge that they have romantic feelings for each other but have no formal commitment. For Sternberg (1986), this would be an instance of a romantic love. From the MU stage, these participants and their partners formalized the relationship by agreeing to be exclusive. To some, it also meant public declaration or letting other chatters know about the relationship.

Compared to online friends, online romantic partners were more likely to feel the need to meet in person and make long-term plans, with the relationship as one of the main considerations. Participants said that they did wish to meet their online friends in person but it was not necessary.

For online romantic partners, however, the relationship was not complete until they had met in person. One male participant shared:

“...kaya kami di tumagal kasi di sya nagpakita, parang ayaw nyang ipakita yung totoong sarili nya... hindi ko kaya yung ganon na relationship na hindi ko naman nakikita.”

*Stage 4: The decision to meet in person.* For romantic partners, meeting in person was inevitable if they wanted the relationship to grow. In this research, it was found that the initial meeting in person was usually an affirmation of the intimacy already established online. Romantic partners felt awkward and shy just right after seeing each other for the first time. However, once they started conversing, they overcame the initial discomfort. The partners got back to relating with each other in the way they did online, which was warm and intimate.

How does physical attractiveness operate in this kind of situation? Most of the participants shared that physical attractiveness was secondary. They said that it still mattered but the personality of the partner and their “chemistry” (how well they got along) were more important. Several participants reported that they were not necessarily attracted to their partner/potential partner physically when they first met in person, but they still allowed the relationship to develop:

“Iba yung dating sa akin kasi, usually, ang type kong girl is yung very simple, di masyadong nag-ma-make-up, tapos simpleng manamit ganon. Sya hindi, sya may kulay ang buhok nya, naka-make-up sya, ang taas ng heels nya, so, parang naculture shock ako, so, sabi ko hindi ko sya type tapos, ayun after that, syempre we still talk sa phone...”

Physical intimacy happened relatively faster for couples who had previously established “physical intimacy” (e.g. verbalization of the physical aspects of intimacy, cybersex) online. On their first meeting, romantic partners felt more open in expressing affection through physical intimacy. It appears that the interaction online functions as a venue for “foreplay”. This explains why there is an acceleration of physical intimacy once they meet in person.

“Kasi before, before kami nag meet, naglolokohan kami, sabi nya, the first thing I’d do pag nagkita tayo, I’ll kiss you. Torrid

ha, gumaganon sya. Sabi ko, sige, kiss din kita. Mga ganon, mga ganong biruan.”

Various degrees of physical intimacies were experienced by the participants on their first meeting in person: from holding hands, hugging, kissing, necking and petting, and even sexual intercourse.

The initial meeting in person simply echoed the intimacy experienced online, if not intensified. This, however, was not predictive of the chances of survival of the relationship.

*Stage 5: The decision to continue or terminate the romantic relationship after meeting in person.* This stage highlights the factors that facilitate the continuation of a relationship that developed online. Majority of the participants believed that IRC is just a medium for meeting and establishing intimacy. The true test of the relationship comes a bit later, as the couple gets to know each other better “in real life”. Many of them felt that IRC helped in facilitating the establishment of the relationship. However, their relationship on IRC was not enough to ensure success in the relationship. For some, greater cues and further exposure could lead to disillusionment and frustration. One female participant shared:

“Iba pala yung in person. Ibang-iba. Tapos basta may trait siya na hindi ko nagustuhan. Tapos I think din na, ganon din, siguro may ayaw din siya sa akin... Kasi pag online kumbaga kung anong titype ko may reaction siya dun. Kung anong titype niya, may reaction din ako doon. Pero pag in person, iba. Iba yung hinihirit niya.”

For the participants, having frustrations and disillusionments was not different from relationships that develop in-person. There were frustrations and disillusionments as one gets to know the person better in the course of the relationship. However, the expectations set by their high similarity online and the accelerated processes online could accentuate the feelings of frustration. The challenge for online partners, according to them, is to present themselves in the most authentic way online and to meet in person as soon as they can.

## DISCUSSION

It appears that the formation of interpersonal attraction and romantic relationships online does not deviate much from the in-person process. The major stages of development for both online and in-person are similar. However, a closer look at the processes shows that the elements that comprise the stages of in-person relationship development are qualitatively different from that of online development. The major factors that account for the differences in the formation of relationships online and in person are physical attractiveness, proximity, accelerated intimacy, novelty and uniqueness of the medium and physical expressions of intimacy.

The first stage in the establishment of a relationship is the use of attraction cues. Basic demographic characteristics, such as *age, sex, and location* (ASL) are considered as important information in initiating interaction. By identifying a person in terms of these basic demographic characteristics, processing of information becomes more efficient (Franzoi 1996). Online, the lack of physical cues could make one feel uncertain of how to deal with others. Knowing information as basic as age and gender provide a direction as to how one would approach the other. The interaction, thus, becomes easier to initiate and facilitate. The gender differences in terms of age preference for a chatmate is consistent with the prediction of the socioevolutionary theory of mate selection: that males look for younger females and females look for older males (Buss and Barnes 1986; Howard, Blumstein, and Schwartz 1987; Sprecher, Sullivan, and Hatfield 1994; Wright 1995; Ickes and Duck 2000; Berry and Miller 2001).

Proximity and propinquity/familiarity effects also serve as attraction cues on IRC. Online, proximity is defined by *intersection frequency* or "how often you run into the person online" (Wallace 1999). Thus, proximity in online context is related to how often people encounter each other through the medium. On IRC, regulars of the same

chatroom who log on at the same time are more likely to meet and interact. They are also the ones who see each others' nicks most of the time. The mere familiarity of the nick makes the owner more attractive. This is consistent with familiarity effects in in-person interaction (Zajonc 1968).

In person, proximity is defined in terms of physical distance or "the location of people relative to one another" (Franzoi 1996). So, how does physical/geographic location figure in online interaction? Since one of the main features of online interaction is it allows people who are geographically far apart to communicate, location should not matter much. However, it was observed that most of the participants' romantic relationships were with people geographically close to them. The participants who had partners far from them (note that they are all females) talked about meeting their partner in person as a big part of their long-term plans about the relationship. All the participants emphasized the value of being physically together. Proximity is not as essential when it comes to online friends.

The second stage in the process of relationship formation is the establishment of intimacy. Similarity established on their first chat is a crucial factor. Chatters remember information that would make it easy for them to categorize the other under a social group. If the other chatter is perceived as part of the ingroup, similarity is heightened (Postmes, Spears, and Lea 1998). Wallace (1999) also provides an explanation as to how perceived similarity could be magnified in online interaction. She says that the law of attraction is based not on the number of similarities but on the proportion of similarities. Applied to initial interaction online, the absence of physical cues, the limited time, and the lack of sufficient information all conspire to magnify similarity. What happens is that because of limited number of information available, the proportion of similarity increases. For example, if two people talk about their love problems on their first chat, they would perceive the other as highly similar to them, disregarding other characteristics unknown to



them at that moment. What they would remember about this chatter is how similar he/she is to them.

Perceptions of one's attractiveness based on inferred personality traits also matter in the maintenance of interaction. Chatters sustain their relationship with people who possess traits they desire. Males prefer nurturing and caring female chatmates, while females prefer intelligent and confident male chatmates. Again, such preferences are consistent with the socioevolutionary theory of mate selection (Buss and Barnes 1986; Howard, Blumstein, and Schwartz 1987; Sprecher, Sullivan, and Hatfield 1994; Wright 1995; Ickes and Duck 2000; Berry and Miller 2001). Also, it is important to note that the choices are consistent with gender stereotypes, showing that online interaction is not deprived of the perceptual biases we encounter in person (Stewart, et al. 1999). According to Whitty and Carr (2003, 884), "although cyberspace offers a potential space where, putatively, gender roles could be transcended – as people play at love, this does not always eventuate."

According to Sprecher and Duck (1994), the quality of communication is "not solely based or even primarily on self-disclosure". The quality of communication is based on how personal, smooth, efficient, important, and satisfying the communication is *perceived* to be. Thus, what matters in the quality of initial interaction is not the level of disclosure between chatters but how they perceived the chat to be. Chatters perceiving their initial chat as "fun"/"enjoyable" was found to be a key factor in establishing intimacy.

The third stage involves the intensification of attraction leading to a romantic relationship. High level of disclosure was seen as a significant factor in the development of intense attraction. Disinhibition is one possible reason for the high level of disclosure online. According to Zimbardo (1969), anonymity reduces inhibitions of behavior. The limited cues of online interaction afford chatters to pour out their emotions without much fear of being judged negatively. People who have difficulty expressing in-person might find it easier to express themselves

online. Aside from anonymity, novel or unstructured situations also decrease inhibitions (Zimbardo 1969). The novelty of chatting on IRC could contribute to the reduction of self-regulation (deindividuation) which encourages high level of disclosure. The initial high level of disclosure of one party encourages an equally high level of disclosure from the other. This is the norm of self disclosure reciprocity followed by new acquaintances (Cunningham, Strassberg, and Haan 1986). In an in-person interaction, disclosure is expected to happen gradually. Online, however, the unique characteristics of Internet Relay Chat (which afford a chatter to become anonymous and disinhibited) allow greater disclosure even in an initial encounter. It is important to mention that the high level of disclosure in online interaction does not guarantee better quality relationships. What is established, however, is that there are qualities of online interaction that facilitate disclosure which, in turn, accelerates intimacy.

Also, the novelty and uniqueness of online interaction contribute to the experiences of emotional arousal that intensifies attraction. IRC is a new medium of communication that people have started experiencing relatively recently. It can be deduced that IRC is a novel situation that induces arousal. Thus, with the knowledge that an arousing situation can be, in itself, a factor for attraction, IRC could be a context that spurs attraction. One might argue that chatting on IRC might not necessarily be a highly arousing situation. However, Ickes and Duck (2000) maintain that the same effect occurs even if the experience is not highly arousing, as long as it is novel.

Attention was also found to be a salient factor in intensifying attraction between two chatters. According to Wallace (1999), since there are fewer methods to show our attraction online, attention is probably the most important way to show you like someone. The attention given to them by their partner makes the chatters like their partner more.

Chatters also communicate in many ways (e.g., email, text, phone calls, etc.), not just through chat. Sociologists call this *complex connectivity*

(Pertierra et al. 2002). Having multiple venues of interaction was shown to increase disclosure and intimacy.

The fourth stage is the decision to meet in person. On IRC, romantic relationships may be initiated and maintained for some time. However, the absence of the physical components of relationships hinders the complete development of online relationships. The maintenance of online romantic relationships is highly dependent on the anticipation of meeting and continuing the relationship in person. Online romantic partners feel the need to meet in person. According to Baker (2002), people involved in purely online relationships will, at some point, consider physical proximity as essential to sustain the relationship. Inevitably, online romantic relationships may have to shift from online to in-person.

In in-person interaction, perceived physical attractiveness is one of the two strongest predictors of romantic attraction (Sprecher and Duck 1994). In this study, it was found that physical attractiveness still plays a part, albeit not as big as when one meets someone in person right away. Nonphysical characteristics are given more importance, compared to meeting someone in person without prior online interaction. Physical attractiveness does not play a key role in the continuation or the termination of the relationship. The reason for this is that online, knowing each other happens from the inside out (Baker 2000).

The last stage is the decision to continue or terminate the relationship. The most common advice given to people who engage in online interaction is honesty of self-presentation (Rake 1998). For instance, physical attractiveness depends much on the reconstruction of the actual physical body. Online participants can acquire a variety of identities (Whitty 2003). However, it has been shown that chatters who have the intention of establishing relationships are less likely to lie and deliberately project a false image of self. In fact, these chatters who are willing to foster relationships uphold an identity with the use of a regular nick (Bechar-Israeli 1995). The more established the identity, the less

likely that a person will engage in a socially undesirable behavior (Zimbardo 1969). However, even without deliberate intent to mislead others, deception could occur on IRC. The Hyperpersonal theory of Walther (1997) explains why this happens. The unique characteristics inherent in an online interaction allow a person to engage in selective self-presentation. It is true that whether online or in person, people aim to present the self in a socially desirable way. However, this is highlighted online because there are fewer cues. The presented self is magnified as the “real” self because of the absence of disconfirming cues. Furthermore, disconfirming cues can also be easily eliminated online because of the fact that computer-mediated communication, such as chatting, allows for editing and off-line processing. Aside from selective self-presentation, the lack of sufficient cues compels people to fill in the missing information with idealized information – thus people may idealize the impressions they construct of their communication partners. The interaction of selective self-presentation and idealization of impression results to a distorted image. Thus, online, it is possible that interaction is based on “idealized” perception of the other. This, now, becomes problematic when the couple decides to meet in person. Baker (2002) highlights the importance of accuracy of self-presentation. She says that transition to in-person is facilitated by honest and accurate exchange of information, thoughts, and feelings.

## **CONCLUSION**

IRC can be instrumental in the formation of relationships. It can be a venue to initiate interaction and to facilitate intimacy. Like any other forms of communication, however, IRC is not an assurance of the success of the relationship. This still depends on how the people involved would maximize the qualities of the medium. It is, indeed, not a question of whether or not meaningful relationships are formed online. This research shows that meaningful relationships are formed through online interaction, particularly on chatting. Friendships can exist and could be maintained purely online. Romantic relationships can be established

and developed online. However, it appears that an online romantic relationship, even if it is perceived as real, is considered incomplete if it is only online. Friendships, which rely solely on intimacy, may be complete online. Romantic relationships, on the other hand, demand a physical component. This becomes the impetus for couples to move from online to in-person interaction.

This study was also able to establish that current theories and assumptions on interpersonal attraction and romantic relationships are still useful and necessary but not adequate to explain and capture the essence of online attraction and relationships. The Internet is, indeed, changing significant aspects of human relations, and research should move towards finding new and more sufficient explanations to capture these online contexts.

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