

To date or not to date?

What are the factors that influence the desire to date on online dating platforms?

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Abstract

Aim

The purpose of the present paper is to explore a modern social behaviour that gained increasing popularity in the past years, that of meeting a possible romantic partner through an online dating app. Even though the research on human mating is not new, the sub-domain of online dating is relatively uncharted. The present study builds on previous researches and recontextualises older insights in the present social dynamics. Thus by developing a more comprehensive model of human behaviour specific to this communication medium, the current scientific knowledge is further enriched. The most important elements of innovation that distinguish the present research from previous others are the distinction between the two types of romantic motivation (hook-up and long term relationship) that may moderate the relationship between different variables as well as considering the role of perceived accessibility in the influence of the desire to date. Hence the paper explores the influence of the profile's perceived trustworthiness, the profile's perceived accessibility, the profile's perceived physical attractiveness and the profile's perceived similarity on the viewer's desire to date as moderated by the type of romantic motivation and gender.

Method

In order to gather the necessary data, an online survey with Romanian respondents was implemented as a research instrument. The participants were exposed to a fictive online dating profile and afterwards queried with a series of questions evaluating the different independent variables that were considered. A mixed of already validated scales, as well as original items, were used.

Results

Finally, the analysis revealed that the most important element that influences the desire to date is physical attractiveness, both in the case of long term romantic motivation (long-term relationship) and short term romantic motivation (hook-up). The profile's perceived trustworthiness, similarity and accessibility proved to also influence the viewer's desire to date. The profile's perceived trustworthiness is more important in the case of choosing a long term mate, and it is more significant for female rather than male viewers. Both the perceived attractiveness of the profile and the perceived similarity of the profile influence the perceived trustworthiness of the profile, although the observed effect is small. Finally, both relationships are moderated by gender, women more than men perceiving individuals who are more similar in some traits as well as more attractive as being more trustworthy.

Conclusions

The study supports the current findings in the scientific literature: the central role of physical attractiveness in choosing a possible mate as well the impact of perceived similarity and perceived trustworthiness on the individual's desire to date. Additionally, it extends the field of scientific knowledge by exploring the role of proximity and romantic motivation in influencing user's behaviour. As a consequence new possible lines of research were open such as a more in-depth exploration of the role of proximity in choosing a possible partner an area where the literature is scarce as well as the role of more specific similarities such as political or spiritual beliefs. Given the social particularities of the context of the study (COVID-19 pandemic), it is recommended that the research will be replicated once the social distancing restriction are lifted. Other contexts in which the model is suggested to be further tested are in the case of individualistic cultures as well as the LGBTQ+ community.

Keywords: online dating, trustworthiness, physical attractiveness, homophily, proximity.

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1. Introduction

For many, dating apps such as Tinder, Badoo, or OkCupid have become the norm for meeting a partner (Aubrey, 2020). Currently, the estimated number of users for these platforms is 242,92 m (Statista, 2020). There are more couples forming online (40% of couples) than through other "traditional" means such as friends or family (Rosenfeld et al., 2019). In comparison, conventional methods, dating apps offer a series of advantages: convenience, access to an untapped pool of potential partners and security. By using these apps, one can search for a possible match at any given time, in any location. Through the geolocation feature, based on proximity, users are presented with similar individuals that have common romantic interests. Regarding safety, if a partner is not desired, it can be blocked, as a consequence, the risks associated with being in physical proximity to a stranger are reduced. Even more, in order to increase the safeness of the dating experience, some apps invest in creating panic buttons for real-life dates (Wells, 2020). In the case of most dating platforms, for a pair to be formed, both users need to express their liking in each other. This decision can be based on a series of explicit and implicit pieces of information (Gibbs et al. 2010). The first category includes the details that are intentionally revealed such as personal pictures, age, a short description of oneself, favourite song (through the connection with platforms such as Spotify), interests, links to other social profiles (e.g. Instagram), profession, the company the person is working for, education (last graduated institution) and residency city. Not all the previously mentioned elements are mandatory to be disclosed. The degree to which these are shared depends on one's preferences of tailoring the profile. Regarding the implicit information, this refers to the aspects that are unintentionally revealed, such as income, personality traits or attributes. These can be derived from the interpretation of intentionally shared information (e.g. grammar errors, word choice, the background of pictures, type of photos one decides to present).

Early adopters of the technology were often paired with stereotypes such as "nerd", "lacking social skills" or "desperate", due to their group membership (Orr, 2004; Whitty & Carr, 2006). Through extension, these negative associations have been attributed to online platforms. As the technology began to be adopted by members from other social groups, the usage of such websites has been destigmatised (Finkel et al., 2012). Another factor that contributed to the acceptance of these apps were appearances in mainstream culture such as movies (e.g. "You've got mail", "Swiped") and TV series (e.g. "The ABC of Online Dating"). Additionally considering the present situation of COVID-19 that pushes users towards the online medium (Aubrey, 2020) an increase in the usage of these platforms has been observed (Garsd, 2020; Meisenzahl, 2020; Shaw, 2020).

It is estimated that currently, there are 66.5m online dating apps users in Europe (Statista, 2020 a). Moreover, the penetration of these apps is expected to increase from 7.8% in the present to 9.8% by 2024 (Statista, 2020a). The most popular apps among Europeans are Badoo and Tinder (Iqbal, 2020). Specific to Romania, according to a study realised in 2018 (Mihai, 2018), 36% of Romanians use online dating apps. Moreover, it is expected that the number of users will increase, reaching 0.51 m. users by 2024 (Statista, 2020b). The most popular platforms among Romanian users are Tinder, Badoo and OkCupid (Bonea, 2015). Most users belong to the age segment 35-44, followed equally by individuals aged 25-34 and 45-54 (Statista, 2020b). Thus it can be observed the usage is not dominated by young users. From a socio-economical perspective, individuals that access these platforms have low and medium incomes, and more than 60% are males (Statista 2020b). The growing trend in popularity of these apps in the Romanian market can be further illustrated by the creation of a dating app, exclusively for Romanian users- Entrigd (getentrigd.com).

The proposed research focus is of scientific relevance given the centrality of romantic relationships in individual well-being (Claxon & Van Dulmen, 2013; Finkel et al., 2012). Baumeister and Leary (1995)

categorise the need for human connection as a fundamental motivator for humans. Furthermore, it has been shown by previous research that individuals who have satisfying intimate relationships enjoy better health (Cohen et al. 1998; Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2005) and experience more happiness (Diener & Seligman, 2002) in contrast to their counterparts that have a higher chance to experience depression or other illnesses (Cacioppo et al., 2002). Thus, due to their scope, dating apps play a crucial role in the well-being of the users.

The research regarding human mating is not new, as early as 1937, Waller proposed the mechanism of "rating and dating". Numerous other dynamics have been analysed over the years: the dynamic between physical attractiveness and romantic interest (Bryne et al., 1968), the relationship between gene potential and partner selection (Barber, 1995), cultural influences on romantic interest (Beschneider & Walster, 1974), trustworthiness in the context of dating (Valentini et al., 2020), trait similarity (Finkel et al. 2012; Little, et al. 2006) or physical proximity (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997). Moreover, numerous papers have been written on the subject of online dating platforms analysing user behaviour (Gibbs et al. 2011), self-representation modalities (Rogge et al. 2020), the importance of personality traits in choosing a partner (Sevi & Dogruyol, 2020), motivators for using the platforms (Sumter et al. 2017) or the weight of different direct and indirect cues about partner's fitness: education, income (Su & Hu, 2019) or grammar errors (Van der Zanden et al., 2020).

Lists containing a various number of items (between 15-75) describing different partner qualities have been used over the years (Hill 1945, Buss & Barnes, 1986; Goodwin & Tang, 1991). Several attempts to identify a set of underlying dimensions have been made. Simpson and Gangestad (1992) propose two dimensions: Personal/ Parenting qualities and Attractiveness/ Social visibility, while Shackelford et al. (2005) propose four universal dimensions of human mate preference: love vs status/resources, dependable/stable vs good looks/health, education/intelligence vs desire for home/children and sociability vs similar religion. Moreover, Fletcher et al. (2004) propose three dimensions warmth/trustworthiness, attractiveness/vitality and status/resource. An important limitation of these studies that needs to be highlighted is the presumed inequality in economic power between men and women. The modern socio-economical realities differ greatly compared to the 1939 context in which Hill (1945) formulated the items for his research. Thus, the usage of such items in later researches (e.g. Buss et al. 2001; Hoyt & Hudson, 1981; Hudson & Henze, 1969; McGinnis, 1958; Shackelford et al., 2005) can be considered anachronistic. As society advances, these romantic cultural preferences shift as revealed in the study by Chang et al. (2011). Thus a revised, updated version of these dimensions applied to the particularities of the online environment is needed.

In a recent study, Brecht et al. (2020) examine to what extent do attractiveness, similarity in age and similarity in personality influence partner choice on Tinder. However, it can be noted that several variables that might have an impact on the desire to date are not considered such as romantic motivation or physical proximity, even though it has been shown in previous papers that they influence the choice of a partner (Curington et al., 2020; Fletcher et al., 2004; Skopek et al., 2011). Su and Hu (2019) analyse the data set extracted from an online dating Chinese site. The elements that have been considered are age, height, occupation, educational level and income. Elements such as explicit physical attractiveness or trustworthiness were not considered. It needs to be highlighted that the data set used is dated to 2011; it can be argued that due to different socio-cultural-economical shifts, the online behaviour on dating apps has transformed. Moreover, culture plays an important role in the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour associated with finding a partner (Marshall, 2008). Therefore the findings from the studies undertaken in Asia may not be accurate for the western users and vice versa. McGloin and Denes (2016) construct a model that predicts the desire to date that includes trustworthiness, personality trait similarity and attractiveness. However, elements such as romantic motivation or other types of similarities, such as similarity in belief or lifestyle are not

considered. Thus this model does not account for all the possible influences on the desire to date. Based on those previously mentioned, it can be argued that to different extents, previous studies do not regard all the possible elements that can be considered when analysing the desire to date.

By answering the following research question: "What are the elements that influence Romanian user's desire to date on online dating platforms?", the purpose of the present research is to fill the theoretical gap previously highlighted. By doing so, the paper offers a comprehensive updated model accounting for the most significant elements that influence the user's desire to date; advancing thus the research in the domain of human mating by charting the behaviour of choosing a partner on dating websites. The paper, through an original research, invites the reader to reconsider previous studies in the domain and recontextualised the results of the earlier analyses to match the modern socio-cultural-economic dynamics.

The paper will unfold as follows: in the next section, a brief summary of the previous research, as well as the most important elements that influence the desire to date, will be discussed. In addition, the research hypothesis will be introduced. Following, the methodology section will present the: research design, procedure, sampling approach, stimuli design, measurements and details about the respondents. The results of the statistical analyses will be exposed succeeded by a discussion about their implications. Finally, the limitations of the present paper will be displayed, and possible future research directions will be proposed.

2. Theoretical Framework

As previously presented, in order for a couple to be created, most dating apps require both partners to like each other's profiles. However given that there are six motivators for dating app usage including non-romantic ones such as entertainment, friendship or self-validation (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017; Sumter et al. 2017), the present study, does not conceptualise the desire to date as mere liking in the other person but as the extent to which a user is willing to actively engage with the other person and deepen the relationship for one of the two possible romantic purposes: long term relationship or hook-up. In order to consider the most relevant elements that may influence the desire to date, an extended literature review was performed- the results are presented in the next sub-section. Moreover, after careful consideration based on the results of the previous analysis, four variables were considered as decisive elements influencing the desire to date: physical attractiveness, proximity, trustworthiness and similarity. Their importance will be further developed in the theoretical framework. Furthermore, the dynamics between the independent variables were examined; therefore, the connection between trustworthiness and similarity and trustworthiness and physical attractiveness are further explored. Finally, this section ends with a discussion about the role of gender and romantic motivation as moderators

Numerous lists of the elements that may influence romantic motivation have been composed (e.g. Hill 1945, Buss & Barnes, 1986; Goodwin & Tang, 1991)nonetheless, some of the assumptions on which these classifications were based such as differences in social and economic power between man and women are anachronist. As a result, in order to identify the critical elements that may influence the desire to date, an extended literature review was performed. The results are summarised In Table 1.

Following the dimensions of human mating outlined by Shackelford et al.(2005) and the classification provided by Fletcher et al. (2004) of mate attributes, depending on the object of the research the papers were distributed in 8 categories: trustworthiness, physical attractiveness, type of romantic motivation, personality, proximity (referring to physical and emotional proximity), profile richness, attitudes and beliefs and demographics.

Table 1

Previous research grouped by the object of study

Element that influences the desire to date	Source
Trustworthiness	Valentia, et al. (2020); McGloin & Denes (2018); Gutiérrez-García et al., (2019); Oosterhof & Todorov,2008; Jin & Martin (2015)., Fletcher, et al. (2004), Fletcher, et al. (2014)
Physical attractiveness	Waller(1937); Bryne et al. (1968); Barber (1995); Brecht et al.(2020); McGloin & Denes(2018); Dionet al. (1972); Sigall & Landy(1973); Eastwick & Smith (2018); Meltzer et al (2014)., Luo & Zhang (2009)Lu et al. (2015)., Li et al.(2013)., Penton-Voak, et al. (2001). ; Fletcher, et al. (2004), Fletcher, et al. (2014), Walster et al. (1966), Landolt,et al. (1995).
Romantic motivation	Sumter et al.(2017); Ranzini & Lutz(2017); Li et al.(2011),Fletcher, et al. (2004), Fletcher, et al. (2014)
Demographics	Brecht et al. (2020); Rudder(2014); Bateman (1948), Watson et al. (2004), Livingston & Brown(2018); Curington et

	al.(2020); Wang et al.(2012); Ranzini & Rosenbaum, 2020; Bescheider& Walster(1974), Chang et al.(2011), Su & Hu (2019); Skopek et al.(2011); Skopek, et al. (2011); Hitsch, et al.(2010); Smiths, et al. (1998); De Hauw, et al. (2017); Su & Hu, (2019); Trivers (1972); Ong et al.(2020), Ong & Wang(2015); Bertrand et al.(2015); Lu et al. (2015) Li et al. (2013). Huberman et al.(2004) Fletcher et al. (2014), Landolt et al. (1995).
Personality	Finkel et al.(2012); Little, et al.(2006); Sevi & Dogruyol(2020); Brecht, et al. (2020); McGloin & Denes(2018); Botwin et al. (1997); Neyt, et al. (2020), Jin & Martin (2015)., Gattis, et al. (2004), Luo & Klohnen (2005); Simpson & Gangestad (1992), Lippa (2007), Fletcher, et al. (2004)
Proximity	Cooper & Sportolari(1997); Cooper & Sportolari (1997); Roeffen(2014); Kirkham (2019); Triscoti et al.(2017), Schneider et al.(2012) Bossard. (1932)
Richness of dating profile	Van der Zanden et al. (2020); Ellision et al.(2006). Jin & Martin (2015)
Attitudes & Beliefs	Vogels (2020); Fiore & Donath (2005), Hernandez & Sarge (2020). Shackelford et al.(2005), Lippa (2007),Watson et al. (2004); Huber & Malhotra (2017), Vogels (2020); Fiore & Donath, (2005),; Luo & Zhang (2009), Byrne (1971).Byrne (1961), Luo & Klohnen (2005)

2.1. Physical attractiveness

It has been shown in previous studies that physical attractiveness is a predictor of romantic interest (Byrne et al.,1968). The importance of this factor can be explained by three distinct perspectives: evolutionary, cultural and social. From the lens of evolutionary theory, as presented by Barber (1995), there is a strong link between this characteristic and the unconscious perception of a partner as being fit in terms of gene selection. Evident cues such as physical appearances (e.g. smooth skin, clear eyes, symmetry, muscle tone) or behaviour (e.g., activity levels) are easy to evaluate evidence of overall health and fertility; therefore humans have evolved to perceive them as desired qualities in a possible partner (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Regarding the cultural point of view, it has been uncovered that there is a halo effect associated with beautiful individuals - they are viewed as being more skilled with children, socially pleasant and having an overall quality of a good spouse (Dion et al., 1972). Hence, it can be hypothesised that:

H1: The perceived physical attractiveness of the displayed profile positively influences the viewer's desire to date.

2.2. Proximity

By sorting potential matches based on proximity, dating apps explore the insight offered by the Attachment Theory, which emphasises that attachment is strongly impacted by proximity (Bowlby, 1982; Cooper & Sportolari, 1997). In line with this view, proximity to the attachment figure is seen as

a strategy to satisfy the need for support, validation and consolation (Bowlby, 1982). Moreover, the process of attraction formation is sequential, proximity seeking being the first phase of the process (Hazan & Zeifman 1994). In addition, proximity is seen as an important element in intimacy formation (Martson et al., 1998), being an indicator of behavioural intimacy (Hatfield & Rapson, 1987).

According to Brannan and Mohr (2020), the term proximity does not exclusively incorporate physical proximity but a functional distance determined by the number of times one can interact with another. Another term to describe this dynamic is "presence" used by Hong (2015, para. 2) to define a "felt sense of being- with and being there". In their operationalisation of the concept, Teo et al.(2020) identify three dimensions of presence: physical proximity, frequency of contact and perceived availability. Jung et al.(2017) hypothesise that a sense of closeness may be created by geographical proximity. Moreover, online communication offers a limited amount of cues regarding the possible match (Gibbs et al., 2006), thus face to face meetings have the role of complementing online interaction offering additional information about the other person and supporting the process of relation-building (Ramirez & Wang, 2008). The importance of physical proximity is shown by the results of a recent USA study by Kirkham (2019), where 2/3 online dating app users set their maximum limit to 30 miles, 35% of the respondents preferring someone that lives in the same city as they do.

H2: The perceived proximity of the displayed profile positively influences the viewer's desire to date.

2.3. Similarity

Contrary to the popular saying: "opposites attract", scientific research proves a contrasting reality. Likeness in different dimensions such as personality traits, education, beliefs, lifestyle and ethnicity have been revealed as important elements in choosing a possible partner. The phenomenon of bonding with individuals that are similar to oneself is known as homophily (Fox Hamilton et al., 2015) and it predicts that contact with other similar individuals occurs more often than with people that are different (McPherson et al., 2001). Furthermore, it has been exposed that even in the absence of a specific benefit, individuals look to associate with similar others (Tajfel, 1982). A possible explanation comes from Fu et al. (2012), who argues that from an evolutionary perspective, homophily fosters efficient communication among the members of a group leading to cooperation and synergy. Thus considering the central role cooperation plays in a romantic relationship, it can be inferred that homophily is an important element of the selection process.

Another interpretation for this behaviour is given by the Social Identity Theory, where one's identity is strongly linked to the group one is part of (Turner et al.1987). Additionally, by pairing the previous mentioned scientific theory with the Uncertainty Reduction theory, a more comprehensive view on the dynamics of mate selection is offered. In this paradigm, when group membership is shared by possible partners, the individuals already have some information about the other person; in such manner, the initial level of uncertainty is expected to be lowered and also the intimacy level to increase (Berger & Calavrese,1975). The reduction of uncertainty is crucial in the context of online dating; the more certain a person is that one won't be rejected the more efforts one is willing to put into the building of the relationship (Birnbaum et al.2018). In a recent study by Decuyper et al. (2012), that based its theoretical frame on the two theories, it has been shown that partners that were perceived as "typical" enjoyed higher intimacy rate than those perceived as "atypical". A possible explanation that was offered was that the validation of one's behaviour, emotions and cognition due to the same group membership lead to lower contextual uncertainty.

As an extension, according to the Terror Management Theory, someone coming from an outgroup that possesses a different system of beliefs represents a symbolic threat to one's world and identity (Greenberg et al., 1986). An outsider by contesting one's vision presents thus an existential threat and a source of anxiety. As a result, it can be inferred that individuals prefer mates that share their world view paradigm and reinforces their narratives and sense of self. This perspective is supported by the results of the investigations by Vogels (2020) and Fiore and Donath (2005), individuals desire to date people that have the same attitudes and beliefs regarding politics, religion, leisure activities and other lifestyle choices such as smoking. The popularity of niche dating websites such as Farmers Only, Meet Mindful, Where White People Meet or DonaldDaters (for Trump supporters) are practical examples that illustrate the importance of sharing common beliefs for the users of romantic platforms.

Moreover, members of the same groups tend to share some similarities in personality (Laakasuo et al., 2016; Laakasuo et al., 2020; Selfhout et al. 2010). In the case of romantic relationships, the resemblance in personality traits not only predicts a stable romantic partnership (Little, Burt and Perret, 2006) but is also a central element in the early phases of acquaintance making (Sunnafank & Ramirez, 2004). Moreover, research by Botwin et al. (1997) uncovered that in committed relationships, partners that have similar traits are preferred. The same results have been recently uncovered by Neyt et al.(2020), in their study individuals desiring to date people in images that they evaluated as having similar levels of agreeableness and openness. The effect is in line with the previous explanation based on uncertainty reduction theory when individuals share personality traits, the perceived level of information one has in the first encounter is higher, and thus the anxiety associating with meeting a stranger reduced (Berger & Calavrese,1975). Another perspective that highlights the importance of personality similarity in online dating is that of the reinforcement effect. Dating a person with similar traits may create feelings of self-recognition, reassurance and confirmation that will create an enjoyable experience that can increase attraction (Berg & Clark 1986). Finally, it is important to mention that the present paper does not focus on any specific similarity but treats similarity in general.

H3: The perceived similarity of the displayed profile positively influences the viewer's desire to date.

2.4. Trustworthiness

As mentioned in the introduction, compared to traditional means of dating online platforms offer a series of advantages such as convenience and access to a largely untapped pool of possible partners. However, compared to offline methods such modalities are characterised by a social vacuum (Ciausescu, 2020). When one was introduced through friends or family to a potential partner, the individual that facilitated the connection would implicitly vouch for the proper behaviour of the other person, and thus the uncertainty and possible dangers of meeting a stranger reduced (Ciausescu, 2020). In the absence of a third party that can guarantee the proper behaviour of the possible mate, the perceived trustworthiness of the other person plays an important role in the context of online dating. The weight of this aspect is increased by the current trend uncovered by Lyons et al. (2020) that such apps attract individuals that manifest antisocial characteristics such as psychopathy, Machiavellism or narcissism, which can lead to negative behaviours like catfishing, online sexual harassment (e.g. sending unwanted pictures of one's genitals) or even rape.

Toma (2010) differentiated between trust and trustworthiness. According to the same author, trustworthiness is a judgement that can be formed even in the absence of the subject, that he or she

is worthy of trust. In this paradigm, trust is defined as a long term process in which the assumption that the other would react with a certain behaviour in an uncertain situation, is formed (Toma, 2010). Trustworthiness is considered critical for electing long term mates, being fundamental for cooperation (Ferrin et al., 2008) and further inferred as a predictor of good parental skills, acceptance and safety. (Buss & Barnes, 1986; Fletcher et al., 1999, Valentine et al.,2020)

Given the critical importance of trustworthiness from an evolutionary point of view (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992), humans form such impressions based on one's facial characteristics (Todorov et al., 2008) even after 100msc (Willis & Todorov, 2006). Moreover, judgements of trustworthiness are even more important in the early stages of a relationship when the level of uncertainty is higher (Silva et al., 2019). These inferences tend to be stable over time (Zajonc, 1980)- in the study conducted by Gunaydin et al.(2017), initial judgements of trustworthiness forecast similar standpoints one month later. Bonnefon et al.(2017) hypothesise that in the absence of logical cues, these discriminations are based on intuitive processing. Even more, the richer the medium in information, the more accurate the assumptions (Bonnefon et al.,2017). Taking those mentioned into account, the following statement can be hypothesised:

H4: The perceived trustworthiness of the displayed profile positively influences the viewer's desire to date.

As research shows (Gutiérrez-García et al.,2019), judgements about physical attractiveness proceed and influence inferences about one's trustworthiness. In the paper about the functional basis of face evaluation, Oosterhof and Todorov (2008) reached similar conclusions. This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that the same facial cues ("happy faces") impact the perception of both attractiveness and trustworthiness (Oosterhof & Todorov, 2008). In Ma, Xu and Luo (2015) transgenerational study on judgements of facial trustworthiness, attractiveness accounted for almost 60% of impression. Additionally, as expressed earlier, beautiful people enjoy more favourable beliefs than their counterparts (Berry & McArthur, 1985; Dion et al.,1972). This halo effect may extend to the assessment of one's trustworthiness. Therefore it can be hypothesised that:

H5: The perceived physical attractiveness of the displayed profile positively influences perceived trustworthiness of the displayed profile

Antheunis et al.(2010) suggest that choosing a possible mate with some similar characteristics may indirectly offer an advantage in predicting behaviour and thus reducing the uncertainty associated with encountering a stranger. Additionally, as highlighted by Fu et al. (2012), the similarity in some traits may foster cooperation and flawless communication. Moreover, based on the mere exposure effect (Zajonc, 1968), it can be argued that persons who resemble one in some traits enjoy a more positive attitude than those who do not. As already discussed, in the research conducted by Neyt et al. (2020), participants preferred individuals that were similar in openness and agreeableness. These traits are associated with the prosocial behaviour (Kline et al.,2019), which in turn is correlated with trust (Malti et al.,2016). It can be thus hypothesised that :

H6: The perceived similarity of the displayed profile positively influences perceived trustworthiness of the viewer

2.5. Romantic motivation as a moderator

There are six motivators for dating app usage: sex (hooking up), travelling, entertainment, relationship, friendship and self-validation(Ranzini & Lutz,2017; Sumter et al., 2017). The difference between the two romantic motivators: sex and relationship, is that the first one refers to an uncommitted sexual encounter (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013), whereas the second implies a long-term romantic commitment.

According to Fletcher et al.(2004), in the long term, regarding partner characteristics, individuals prefer warmth/ trustworthiness more than attractiveness. Thus, it can be argued that in the case of the long-term relationship motivator, trustworthiness, and similarity will be more important than physical attractiveness regarding the desire to date. Moreover, it has been shown by previous studies that similarity in personality traits (Little et al. 2006) and trustworthiness (Valentine et al.,2020) are important for the stability of a long term relationship. However, taking into considerations the findings of Fletcher et al.(2014), in the case of short encounters; people prefer attractiveness more than attributes associated with the warm-trustworthiness dimension. The explanation provided by the authors is that surface traits such as physical attractiveness are easier and quicker to evaluate than more complex ones such as personality for example.

Krapf (2018) defines long-distance relationships as being those relationships in which members need to travel more than an hour to meet. According to the same author, distance is an irrelevant factor in the case of relationship development in the case of partners that are studying, unemployed or inactive. According to the Sexual Strategy Theory (Buss & Schmit, 1993) depending on the type of relationship, mating (short-term) or parenting (long-term) difference strategies are adopted in order to select a mate. Thus, individuals who have a hook-up motivation may look for partners that are in close proximity in order to lower their mating efforts, the lower the physical proximity, the lower the cost of possible offline interaction (Roeflen, 2014), whereas individuals that are interested in long-term relationships, take more time in evaluating their partner and are more selective in their sexual partners (Trivers, 1972).

H7: In the case of short-term motivation the effect of (a) displayed profile's perceived physical attractiveness and (b) displayed profile's perceived proximity is stronger than in the case of long-term motivation in influencing the viewer's desire to date

H8: In the case of long-term motivation, the effect of (a) displayed profile's perceived trustworthiness and (b) displayed profile's perceived similarity is stronger than in the case of short-term motivation in influencing the viewer's desire to date

2.6. Gender as a moderator

It has been previously proven that women are more risk-averse than men on a series of areas such as financial investments, substance use, environmental degradation and other social activities (Boverie et al.1995; Eckel & Grossman, 2008; McStay & Dunlap, 1983, Spigner et al., 1993). Previous research

in trust games (game theory) shown that women tend to trust less than men (Snijders & Keren, 2000; Eckel & Wilson, 2004). This dynamic is more evident when women are the first movers in trust games (Cox & Deck, 2006). However, it has been shown that women are more reciprocal in trust games (responding to the investment partner with a similar amount of resources that one received) than men, thus being more trustworthy than their counterpart (Croson & Buchan, 1999). This may be explained by considering that from a sociocultural perspective, men and women are socialised distinctively resulting in different relational skills. In such context, women are expected to be more communal oriented than men (Egley, 2009). In the context of dating, it can be argued that due to differences in sexual strategies, women are more loss averse than men (weight risks heavier than benefits) out of a self-protective motivation – in the case of a possible pregnancy, women invest more resources than men (Buss & Schmit, 1993, Li et al., 2012). Thus the perceived trustworthiness seen as reliability in behavioural answers by the partner is more important for women than for men.

H9: Gender moderates the relationship between the perceived trustworthiness of the profile and the viewer's desire to date as follows: the perceived trustworthiness of the profile is more important for female viewers than for male viewers.

In the previous sections, it has been demonstrated how attributes of similarity can be correlated with perceived trustworthiness by being indicators of lower informational uncertainty, cooperation and cohesion. As earlier mentioned given the difference in sexual strategies between men and women (Buss & Schmit, 1993) and the higher resource investment for women than for men, females may pay more attention to attributes of similarity when choosing a mate than males.

H10: Gender moderates the relationship between the perceived similarity of the profile and the perceived trustworthiness of the profile as follows: the perceived similarity of the profile is more important for female viewers than for male viewers.

H11: Gender moderates the relationship between the perceived similarity of the profile and the viewer's desire to date as follows: the perceived similarity of the profile is more important for female viewers than for male viewers.

The results of the research conducted by McGloin and Denes (2018) show that gender moderates the relationship between physical attractiveness and perceived trustworthiness. It has been unravelled that women find males with attractive photos more trustworthy, an effect accounted by the halo effect previously mentioned, whereas men have a contrasting behaviour, finding women with beautiful pictures, less trustworthy. This dynamic was explained as a reverse relation between attractiveness and authenticity, in which women that were too attractive may have been suspected of artificially enhancing their appearances.

H12 Gender moderates the relationship between the perceived physical attractiveness of the profile and the perceived trustworthiness of the profile as follows, the perceived

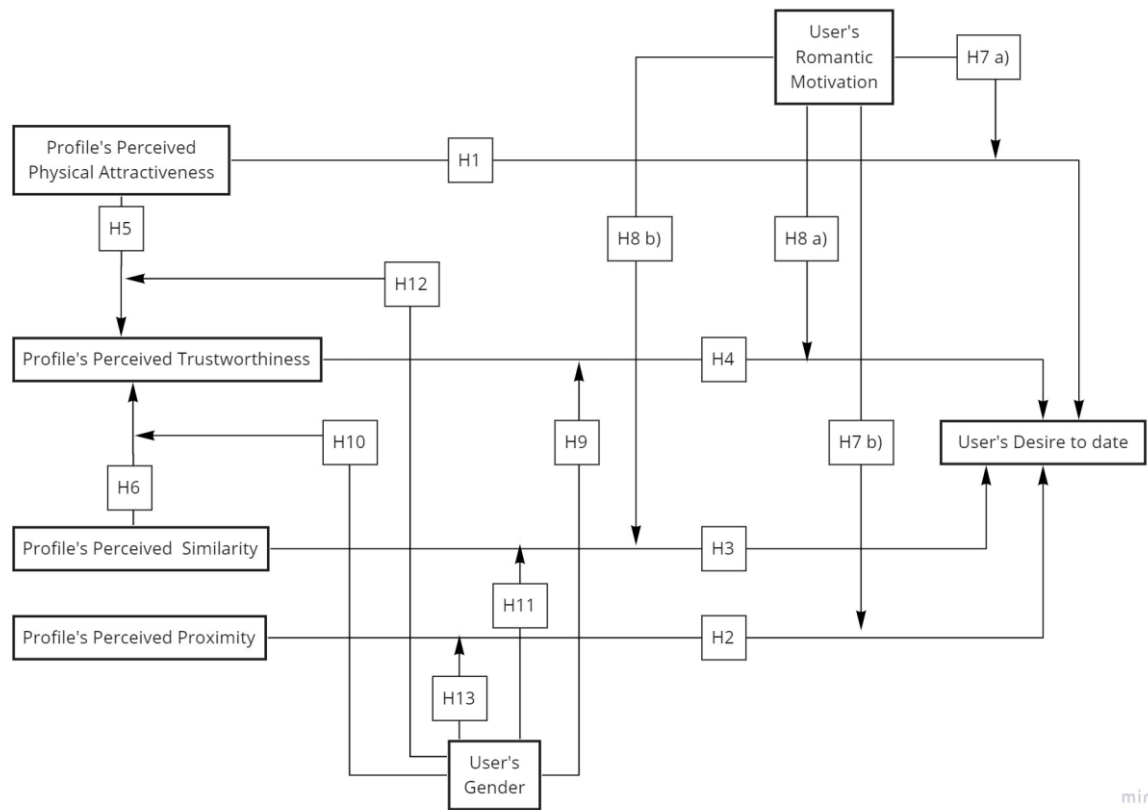
attractiveness of the profile influences the perceived trustworthiness of the profile more in the case of female viewers than in the case of male viewers

Gender strongly influences the structure and specific patterns of human social networks (Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999; Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 2006). Previous studies such as the one conducted by (Fournet & Barrat, 2014; Stehle et al., 2013) discovered that spatial proximity is more important for men than for women in forging and maintaining social connections with peers. Another study by Conradi et al. (2020) uncovered that rejection anxiety, in the case of men, is negatively associated with physical proximity - the lower the distance, the lower the anxiety. A possible explanation for this situation comes from the Social Network Theory in which communication and propinquity create a reciprocal dynamic. Through propinquity, communication opportunities are created. These may create further motivation and as a consequence, future occasions to interact, which led to increased propinquity (Carley 1991, Doreian & Conti 2012, Feld, 1981). Thus it can be hypothesised:

H13: Gender moderates the relationship between the perceived proximity of the profile and the desire to date of the viewers as follows: the perceived proximity of the profile is more important for male viewers than for female viewers

Even though it is generally believed that physical attractiveness is more important for men than for women when selecting a romantic partner, previous research demonstrated that this attribute is equally important for both genders (Curran & Lippold, 1975; Walster et al., 1966). It has been argued by Brehm (1985) that when they need to hypothetically think about this attribute, men overestimate its importance while women underestimated it in their choice. A possible explanation is that individuals are not completely aware of the elements that influence their behaviour (Nisbet & Cui, 1997) and when they are asked about their preferences they offer culturally appropriate responses (Sprecher, 1989). Additionally, Eastwick & Smith (2018) uncovered that the difference between genders regarding this dimension could be observed only in studies where a limited number of stimuli are used (e.g. De Vries, 2010) but not in the ones that use more stimuli (Lewandowski et al., 2007). Thus gender will not be considered a moderator for the relationship between the profile's perceived physical attractiveness and the viewer's desire to date.

Figure 1
Theoretical model.



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3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

The research method employed in the present paper was the survey. A similar approach has been used in previous studies that explore preferences regarding romantic partner's attributes such as Hill (1945) or Buss and Barnes (1986). Compared to past studies, participants were given a point of reference for their evaluation, a fictive online dating profile of a person (male or women, depending on one's preferences) in relation to which they were asked to answer a series of questions measuring the profile's perceived trustworthiness, the profile's perceived physical attractiveness, the profile's perceived proximity, the profile's perceived similarity and the viewer's desire to date.

3.2. Sampling approach

As a sampling method, the snowball approach was used. The author contacted researchers and professors from three universities in Bucharest that agree to distribute the questionnaire among students: the University of Bucharest, Bucharest's School of Economics and The National School for Political and Administrative Studies. Moreover, the questionnaire was shared via the researcher's Facebook page, from where other acquaintances distributed further the link. Two acquaintances of the authors that were Instagram influencers created stories promoting the study. Additionally, the link of the research was distributed in 42 Facebook groups: groups for Romanian diaspora (e.g. Romanians in Japan, Romanians in the USA, Romanians in the Netherlands), dating groups (e.g. Single Romanian Women in Denmark, Single Looking for Mate in Bucharest) student groups (e.g. Students Helping Students, Questionnaires Made by Students, Students in Cluj, Medical Students in Brasov) and general local announcement groups (e.g. Announcements Bucharest, For People Living in Oradea, News Brasov). The data collection lasted one week.

3.3. Procedure

The questionnaire was administered through the online platform Qualtrics. Moreover, the language used was Romanian given the low level of English proficiency and the fact that a foreign language may impose for some participants additional difficulties in completing the question list. The translation was performed by the research and evaluated through a pre-test. The average completion time of the questionnaire was 7 minutes.

In the beginning, respondents were greeted with a message informing them about the purpose of the research, the researcher and her affiliation and their rights as participants. After the informed consent was given, a series of demographic and filter questioned followed. Afterwards, participants were presented with a fictive online profile of a woman or men (depending on their romantic preference). Following the exposure to the stimuli, a series of questions were asked in order to evaluate different aspects of the profiles and measure the independent and dependent variables. Subsequently, the possibility to leave one's e-mail address in order to receive the results of the research was presented. At the end of the questionnaire, a "thank you" message was displayed with the contact details of the researcher.

3.4. Respondents

The total number of valid responses was 536; however, after cleaning the data and accepting only questionnaires that were more than 90% complete, the number of participants reached 342. In this

context, it is important to mention that 90% completion means, participants did not answer the last question of the survey- if they would like to leave their e-mail address in order to receive the results of the research. The respondents were Romanian citizens, older than 18 that used or use dating platforms in order to meet a long term partner or find a hook-up. The average age of the participants was 25 years old (SD = 7.28 years). There were 235 women, and 102 males and the majority of the participants (61.8%) were students. Additionally, 50 respondents identified themselves as members of the LGBTQ+ community. The most popular dating platforms were Tinder (n=302), Facebook (n=97) and Badoo (n=68) (participants had the possibility to indicate more than one platform). Finally, 93 of the participants indicated that they use online dating platforms for short encounters such as hook-ups whereas 247 mentioned that they desire to find a long term romantic partner. It can be observed that the percentage of female participants that search for a long-term relationship through the online platforms (80,8%) is bigger than the male percentage that has similar romantic motivation (53.9%).

Table 2
Participants' demographics

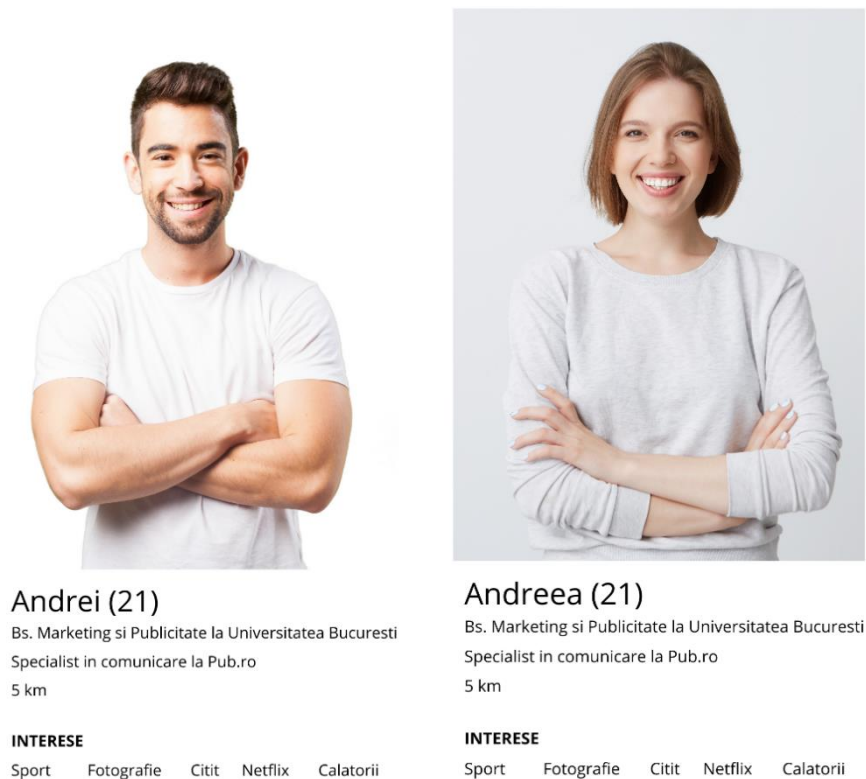
Romantic Motivation		Educational level		Total	
		Lower education	Upper education		
Long-Term	Gender	Woman	95	95	190
		Male	22	33	55
		Other	0	2	2
	Total		117	130	247
Short-Term	Gender	Woman	29	16	45
		Male	25	22	47
		Non-Binary	1	0	1
	Total		55	38	93

3.5. Stimulus design

For the profiles pictures depicted in the fictive dating account, similar images were purposefully chosen in order to reduce any possible unaccounted influences. Both photos depict young individuals, facing the camera, smiling, with a cross-armed posture, dressed in white on a white background. The details provided for each profile were identical: similar name (changed only to depict one's gender), education, age, occupation, distance and interests. The profiles were purposely crafted in order to depict an average user; therefore, the physical traits displayed in the pictures are common among Romanians, so are the names of the individuals as well as their social status (education and job) and their interests: reading, travelling, sports, photography and watching pictures.

Figure 2

Stimuli: Fictive dating profiles



3.6. Measurements

The main measurement instrument consisted of 37 statements that participants were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 signified total disagreement and 7 total agreement. The intention to date was measured through six items, adapted after the measuring instrument created by McGloin & Denes (2018). Statements that were used include: "I would like the person in the image to invite me for a date" or "I would like it if the person in the image would send me a message". The items measuring physical attractiveness were an adaptation after McCroskey & McCain (1974) including six items such as "I think that the person in the image is beautiful" or "The person in the image looks sexy".

For the items that measured trustworthiness, a variation of the scale constructed by McCroskey & Teven (1999) was used. However, the measurement was not on a spectrum presenting two pairs of opposites (e.g. phony and genuine or honest and dishonest) but sentences that pointed to one end of the six facets of the concept. Thus formulations such as "The person in the image looks sincere" or "The person in the image seems fake".

Original statements were created to measure proximity and similarity. In order to evaluate the first variable, eight items were created, representing the three dimensions of the construct described by Teo et al. (2020): physical proximity, frequency of interaction and perceived availability. Some of the statements that were included are: "If we would go on a date the person in the image would answer slowly to my messages" or "It is difficult for me to meet the person in the image in real life when I

want". For measuring perceived similarity, ten items were formulated referring likeness in personality, lifestyle, beliefs, attitudes and group membership.

Regarding romantic interest, participants were asked to choose at the beginning of the questionnaire for what purpose they mainly use dating apps: to find a long term mate, a hook-up or another reason. Moreover, data about the gender of the participants was collected through demographic questions.

3.7. Pre-test

The questionnaire statements were evaluated through a pre-test in order to assess their clarity. The results indicated that some of the original items needed to be changed due to the imperfect translations. Given cultural particularities and the difference in the meaning attributed to a series of words, the following modifications were made. Instead of "The person in the image seems ethical", the sentence "The person in the image has an ethical behaviour", was used. In Romanian ethical can be attributed only to one's behaviour but not to one's person. Moreover, test-subjects indicated that the formulation "moral" was too vague; therefore, the item was transformed into "The person in the image has an appropriate behaviour in the society, moral". A similar transformation was done for the word "honorable" which became "The person in the image is worthy of respect". The changes were made after consulting both English (Cambridge Dictionary) and Romanian (Dictionarul Explicativ al Limbii Romane) dictionaries. Furthermore, to enhance clarity, the formulation, "the person in the image" was integrated into all the phrases.

3.8. Construct validity and reliability

To measure the validity of the constructs, a factor analysis was performed. As a result, items measuring the specific similarities in political and religious views were excluded. It was uncovered that they formed a separate dimension. Information about one's political orientation or religious beliefs are not mandatory to be disclosed in popular apps such as Tinder, Hinge or Badoo. Therefore, they were not included in the fictive profile presented to the respondents in order to maintain the authenticity of the interaction. Out of the total respondents, 67,4% affirmed that they do not agree or disagree with the statement "I think I have similar political views with the person in the image" and 70% chose the same options in the case of "The person in the image has similar religious/spiritual views as me". Given that the answers were highly similar, it can be argued that this can be the underlying reason why they were grouped as a separate dimension from the other similarities. Moreover, a second implication of the factor analysis was the exclusion of the frequency of interaction statements associated with proximity.

Table 4

Factor loading for the items measuring the experimental variables

Statement	Research variable	Factor loading
I would send a text message to the person in the image in order to get to know him/her better	Desire to date	.65
I would be excited if the person in the image would try to talk to me		.8
I would flirt back if the person in the image flirted with me		.79
I would like the person in the image to ask me out on a date		.83

I would like if the person in the image would message me		.84
I would give the person in the image my phone number		.67
I think the person in the image is handsome/ pretty		.79
I think the person in the image is very sexy looking		.73
I think the person in the image is physically attractive	Physical	.82
I don't like the way the person in the image looks *	attractiveness	.78
The person in the image is ugly *		.76
The person in the image is very good looking		.78
The person in the image looks honest		.81
The person in the image looks trustworthy		.81
The person in the image looks worthy of respect (honourable)		.77
The person in the image looks phoney *	Perceived	.68
The person in the image has an adequate behaviour in the society (is moral)	trustworthiness	.84
The person in the image seems to follow ethical principles (is ethical)		.76
It is difficult for me to meet the other person in real life (online) when I want to *		.59
If we would go on a date, I think the person in the image would hardly answer my messages *	Perceived	.91
If we would go on a date, I think the person in the image would hardly answer my calls *	proximity	.88
I think the person in the image has a different personality than I *		.52
Me and the person in the picture share some personality traits		.57
The person in the image has similar hobbies to me	Perceived	.82
I think the person in the image is interested in the same things as me	similarity	.88
I and the person in the image like the same things		.84
I think me and the person in the image could be part of the same groups		.74
I think the person in the picture has the same believes as me		.74

* items were reverse coded

In order to measure the reliability of the construct, a Cronbach's Alpha analysis was undertaken. After the evaluation of the outcomes, the sentences associated with the physical proximity facet of the proximity variable were excluded. The low-reliability level (.59) can be accounted for by the limited number of sentences that were associated with this dimension. The results of Cronbach's alpha analysis are summarised in the table below.

Table 3*Cronbach's alpha results*

Construct	Cronbach's alpha
Viewer's Desire to date	.92
Profile's perceived physical attractiveness	.92
Profile's perceived trustworthiness	.83
Profile's Perceived availability	.78

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

For the results of the statistical analysis presented in this section, the level of significance considered was .05. The results were approximated after the second decimal. The table below presents the mean scores for each construct grouped by romantic motivation.

Table 5

Descriptive statistics main variables grouped by romantic motivation

Romantic Motivation	Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Long-term	Viewer's desire to date	247	4.89	1.44
	Profile's perceived physical attractiveness	247	5.13	1.19
	Profile's perceived trustworthiness	247	4.70	.94
	Profile's perceived accessibility	247	4.47	1.19
	Profile's perceived similarity	247	4.04	.96
Short-term	Viewer's desire to date	93	4.88	1.58
	Profile's perceived physical attractiveness	93	5.04	1.35
	Profile's perceived trustworthiness	93	4.95	.92
	Profile's perceived accessibility	93	4.76	1.32
	Profile's perceived similarity	93	3.91	1.09

4.2. Main results

To explore the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable, a regression analysis was performed. For the statistical computation, the mean scores for the questionnaire answers were considered. It resulted that all four variables were significant; the most robust coefficient was that of physical attractiveness (.63) followed by that of perceived similarity (.31) and perceived trustworthiness (.30). Unexpectedly the coefficient for perceived accessibility was negative (-.11). The model 50.8% of the total variation in the dependent variable. Finally, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) indicates no collinearity in the case of the independent variables, all values being less than 2.

Table 6*Results of the first regression analysis*

Model	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	T	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	-.5	.4		-1.26	.21		
Profile's perceived physical attractiveness	.63	.05	.53	12.66	.00	.85	1.18
Profile's perceived trustworthiness	.3	.06	.19	4.7	.00	.90	1.10
Profile's perceived accessibility	-.11	.05	-.09	-2.29	.02	.96	1.05
Profile's perceived similarity	.31	.06	.21	5.15	.00	.87	1.15

a. Dependent Variable: viewer's desire to date mean

To test the influence of physical attractiveness and perceived similarity on perceived trustworthiness, a second regression analysis was conducted. It results that the two effects are significant, <.01 in both cases. However, the effect is small, the coefficient for physical attractiveness being .13 while for perceived similarity .17. The model explains 8% of the total variation in the dependent variable.

Table 7*Results of the second regression analysis*

Model	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	3.44	.2		13.73	.00
Profile's perceived physical attractiveness mean	.1	.04	.17	3.02	<.01
Profile's perceived similarity mean	.17	.05	.18	3.32	<.01

a. Dependent Variable: profile's perceived trustworthiness mean

4.3. Moderator effects

4.3.1. Romantic motivation

In order to evaluate the influence of romantic motivation on the dynamic between the independent and dependent variables, a moderator analysis using the PROCESS macro by Andrew Hayes was completed. It resulted that romantic interest does not moderate the relationship between physical attractiveness and the desire to date ($\alpha=.85$), nor between perceived accessibility and desire to date ($\alpha=.09$) or similarity and the desires to date ($\alpha=.43$). Nonetheless, it resulted that romantic motivation moderates the dynamic between trustworthiness and the desire to date ($\alpha=.02$), the more someone desire to date with long term relationship as a motivator, the more important trustworthiness is ($B=.41$).

Table 8
Comparative regression analysis

Romantic motivation		Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
Long-term	(Constant)	-1.03	0.5		-2.16	0.03
	Profile's perceived physical attractiveness mean	0.64	0.06	0.53	10.99	<.01
	Profile's perceived trustworthiness mean	0.37	0.07	0.24	5.09	<.01
	Profile's perceived accessibility mean	-0.04	0.06	-0.04	-0.8	0.425
	Profile's perceived similarity mean	0.27	0.07	0.18	3.68	<.01
Short-term	(Constant)	0.88	0.84		1.04	0.3
	Profile's perceived physical attractiveness mean	0.59	0.1	0.51	6.21	<.01
	Profile's perceived trustworthiness mean	0.12	0.13	0.07	0.95	0.35
	Profile's perceived accessibility mean	-0.23	0.09	-0.19	-2.52	0.01
	Profile's perceived similarity mean	0.38	0.12	0.27	3.29	<.01
a. Dependent Variable: viewer's desire to date mean						

4.3.2. Gender

From the moderation analysis (same method as in the previous sub-section), it resulted that gender moderates the relation between trustworthiness and romantic interest ($\alpha = .02$) as follows, perceived trustworthiness is more important for women than for men ($B = .32$). However, the variable does not moderate the dynamic between the perceived accessibility of the profile and viewer's desire to date ($\alpha = .07$) not between profile's perceived similarity and viewer's desire to date ($\alpha = .35$).

Two more moderator analysis were undertaken to evaluate the effect of gender on the relationship between physical attractiveness and perceived trustworthiness and perceived similarity and perceived trustworthiness. In the case of both analyses, a statistically significant relationship was found, $\alpha < .01$ and $\alpha = .03$. Thus gender does influence the dynamic between physical attractiveness and perceived trustworthiness with a $B = .23$ and between perceived similarity and perceived trustworthiness $B = .21$. It needs to be considered that in both cases, the effect is small, and the model explains 8,66% and 9,22% of the total variance within the dependent variable.

Table 9
Comparative regression analysis

Gender		Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
Male	(Constant)	-.43	.53		-.8	.42
	Profile's perceived physical attractiveness mean	.56	.06	.49	9.54	<.01
	Profile's perceived trustworthiness mean	.2	.08	.12	2.43	.02
	Profile's perceived accessibility mean	-.11	.06	-.09	-1.8	.07
	Profile's perceived similarity mean	.44	.08	.3	5.81	<.01
Female	(Constant)	.22	.61		.36	.72
	Profile's perceived physical attractiveness mean	.68	.08	.61	8.35	<.01
	Profile's perceived trustworthiness mean	.26	.09	.21	2.92	<.01
	Profile's perceived accessibility mean	-.05	.07	-.05	-.73	.47
	Profile's perceived similarity mean	.15	.09	.12	1.62	.11
a. Dependent Variable: viewer's desire to date mean						

4.4. Hypothesis results

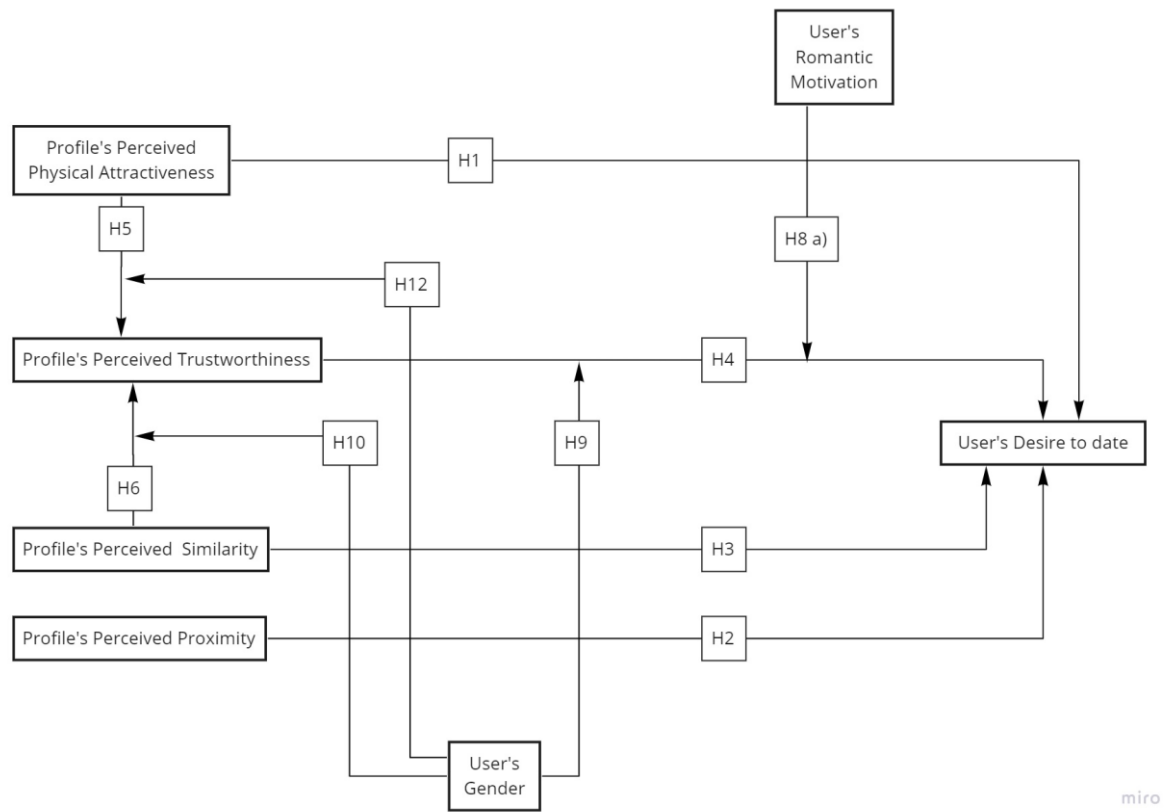
Based on the previous statistical analysis, the table below summarises the implication for the research hypothesis:

Table 10
Hypothesis results

Hypothesis	Status
H1: The perceived physical attractiveness of the displayed profile positively influences the viewer's desire to date.	Accepted
H2: The perceived proximity of the displayed profile positively influences the viewer's desire to date.	Rejected
H3: The perceived similarity of the displayed profile positively influences the viewer's desire to date.	Accepted
H4: The perceived trustworthiness of the displayed profile positively influences the viewer's desire to date.	Accepted
H5: The perceived physical attractiveness of the displayed profile positively influences perceived trustworthiness of the displayed profile	Accepted
H6: The perceived similarity of the displayed profile positively influences perceived trustworthiness of the viewer	Accepted
H7: In the case of short-term motivation the effect of (a) displayed profile's perceived physical attractiveness and (b) displayed profile's perceived proximity is stronger than in the case of long-term motivation in influencing the viewer's desire to date	a) Rejected b) Rejected
H8: In the case of long-term motivation, the effect of (a) displayed profile's perceived trustworthiness and (b) displayed profile's perceived similarity is stronger than in the case of short-term motivation in influencing the viewer's desire to date	a) Accepted b) Rejected
H9: Gender moderates the relationship between the perceived trustworthiness of the profile and the viewer's desire to date as follows: the perceived trustworthiness of the profile is more important for female viewers than for male viewers.	Accepted
H10: Gender moderates the relationship between the perceived similarity of the profile and the perceived trustworthiness of the profile as follows: the perceived similarity of the profile is more important for female viewers than for male viewers.	Accepted
H11: Gender moderates the relationship between the perceived similarity of the profile and the viewer's desire to date as follows: the perceived similarity of the profile is more important for female viewers than for male viewers.	Rejected
H12 Gender moderates the relationship between the perceived physical attractiveness of the profile and the perceived trustworthiness of the profile as follows, the perceived attractiveness of the profile influences the perceived trustworthiness of the profile more in the case of female viewers than in the case of male viewers	Accepted
H13: Gender moderates the relationship between the perceived proximity of the profile and the desire to date of the viewers as follows: the perceived proximity of the profile is more important for male viewers than for female viewers	Rejected

Figure 3

Model containing the accepted variables



5. Discussion of the Results, Future Research Directions & Conclusions

5.1. Discussion of the Results

The following section will present the significance and implications of the statistical results. Regarding physical attractiveness, the results reinforce the current findings in the domain, that the attribute has a decisive importance in choosing a partner (Eastwick et al. 2011; Luo & Zhang, 2009; Thao et al. 2010). The outcomes of the statistical analysis showed no difference in importance between the case of long term romantic motivation and the short term motivation. Additionally, it can be observed that the construct had the greatest weight in influencing the desire to date among all the other considered elements. As exposed by Eastwick and Finkel (2008), individuals chose partners regardless of their declared preferences. Thus it can be hypothesised that users unconsciously eliminate unattractive partners (Li et al., 2013). Such a dynamic can be seen as an evolutionary adaptive mechanism in which good looks are associated with good genes signalling thus a fit partner (Buss & Schmitt, 1993).

Another element that influenced the viewer's desire to date was the perceived accessibility of the profile. However, the results showed a negative correlation between the two variables compared to the expected positive relation. These results need to be interpreted in the light of the current COVID-19 situation that imposes social distancing among individuals. At the time of the study, the number of infections was increasing dramatically in Romania, with numerous government intervention to institute total and partial lockdowns. Thus it can be argued that in the context of the pandemic, individuals were more reluctant to physically meet their possible partners, due to the implied health risks and legal restrictions. Moreover, the lack of difference in importance between the long and short term romantic motivation can be attributed to the perceived risks associated with a physical meeting that do not vary depending on the nature of the meeting.

A second explanation can be generated by considering the strategy that underlines these apps' use: to access an untapped collection of possible partners. Thus it can be hypothesized that before employing the platforms the individual has already exhausted the local pool of nearby partners that could have been met through traditional means such as living in the same vicinity, family, friends or visiting common nearby places (e.g. bars and other public spaces). Hence, one uses the app to extend its reach and access different partner pools beyond those located in physical proximity and has already exhausted, as a consequence the negative correlation between proximity and the desire to date.

As exposed in previous studies (Brecht et al., 2020; Fiore & Donath, 2005; Hernandez & Sarge 2020), the results indicated that similarity in some traits positively influences the desire to date. Additionally, the work of Tanis and Postmes (2005) and Vermue et al. (2019) support the present results by demonstrating that in-group members enjoy more favourable evaluations than outgroup members. Moreover, from the perspective of uncertainty reduction theory, having some similar traits with a stranger may lower the uncertainty associated with an initial interaction (Antheunis et al. 2010). In the light of the essential role played by communication and cooperation in relationship formation and maintenance regardless of the type of bonding that is formed (Canary & Dainton, 2003), it can be understood why the importance of homophily seen as an indicator of communication and cooperation among individuals (Fu et al., 2012) did not vary among the romantic scenarios.

Given the characteristic uncertainty associated with online interaction, and the social vacuum in which connection on a dating website form, trustworthiness proved to be another key element in selecting a partner. The importance of this attribute has been previously shown in the studies by Valentine et al. (2020) and Fletcher et al. (2004), the present results being thus in line with the current scientific research. Additionally as predicted due to the halo effect described by Berry and McArthur (1985) and Dion et al. (1972) and in line with the findings of McGloin and Denes (2018), the profile's perceived

physical attractiveness does positively influence the profile's perceived trustworthiness. As predicted, similar results were found in the case of the profile's perceived similarity, and the profile's perceived trustworthiness. As previously mentioned, in-group members are seen as more trustworthy than out-group members (Tanis & Postmes, 2005; Vermue et al., 2019). Moreover, from the perspective of uncertainty reduction, having some similar traits with a stranger may lower the uncertainty associated with an initial interaction (Antheunis et al., 2010). However, it needs to be noticed that both effects are small.

The relationship between the profile's perceived trustworthiness and the user's desire to date is the only dynamic that was moderated by the romantic motivation variable. In this case, it was showed that the attribute would be more important in the context of long-term motivation than in that of short-term romantic motivation confirming those predicted, and the results of previous studies such as the one conducted by Valentine et al. (2020) and Fletcher et al. (2014). Moreover, another moderator for this relationship was gender, the attribute being more important for women than for men. Such results can be accounted by two factors: the general tendency of females to be more risk-averse than males and women more than men are affected by self-protective reasons, in a case of pregnancy, having to invest more resources than their counterparts (Buss & Schmit, 1993).

Another dynamic moderated by gender was that between physical attractiveness and trustworthiness confirming thus the current scientific status quo (e.g. McGlorin & Denes, 2018). The statistic indicated that women are more likely to associate physical attractiveness with perceived trustworthiness than men. As previously presented, in the case of female participants, this can be due to an existing halo effect (Dion et al., 1972). The last relationship moderated by gender was that between the profile's perceived similarity and the profile's perceived trustworthiness, the perceived similarity in some traits being more important for female viewers than for males. As presented in the previous section given that women are more risk-averse than men and must invest more in a case of a possible pregnancy, indicators of collaboration and cooperations such as similarity and same group membership may weight more for female viewers than for male viewers.

Finally, it needs to be highlighted that the statistical analysis proved that gender does not moderate the relation between perceived availability and the desire to date nor between perceived similarity and the desire to date. As mentioned above, the results need to be seen in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic that may have altered the normal behaviour of individuals. It can be argued that both men and women do not desire to meet the other person in real life due to the current context. Regarding the second dynamic, it can be further asserted that homophily is such a fundamental tendency among humans, that is not gender-dependent -it has been shown that people instinctively search to associate with others, even on made-up similarities (Tajfel, 1970). In the formation of a romantic bond, it can be crucial element because it facilitates communication among individuals as well as simplifies the process of evaluating and predicting other's actions (Hamm, 2000; Ibarra, 1992; Werner & Parmelee, 1979).

5.2. Research Limitations & Future Research

Some limitations of the present research need to be highlighted. To begin with, even if the model takes into account more factors than previous attempts in the domain, regarding the similarity variable, some dimensions that may have had influenced the desire to date were not considered such as education, social status, age, ethnicity or race. It is recommended that in a future research, these dimensions would also be tested in order to evaluate their weight. Furthermore, regarding similarity in political and religious views, the results were ambiguous, many respondents answering “neither agree nor disagree” in the case of these questions. A possible explanation may be accounted for by the lack of explicit clues regarding the preferences of the person in the fictive profile. If a similar study would be carried in the future, it is suggested that these preferences would be explicitly stated.

The instrument used to measure proximity was composed of original statements, following the dimensions described by Teo et al.(2020). However, when testing for validity and reliability, only the statements describing perceived availability were kept. This can be explained by the low number of statements concerning each of the three dimensions. The subdomain exploring the dynamic between proximity and the desire to date is still uncharted, future research can focus on this area and support the construction of a more robust measurement instrument.

Attraction is dependent on both biological factors as well as socio-economical and cultural elements (Karandashev et al., 2020); thus the results can be cultural dependent. Moreover given that Romania is a collectivistic culture, and taken into consideration the differences in norms, attitudes and customs regarding romantic behaviour between collectivistic cultures and individualistic culture (Marshall, 2008), it can be argued that different dynamics may be discovered in West-European countries or the United States. Thus it is suggested that in the future, the model will be tested with other cultures that are higher in individuality.

It needs to be considered that the majority of the respondents were heterosexual, and results cannot be extended to the behaviour of LGBTQ+ member. An analysis focusing on this group is recommended, followed by a comparison in the results. Finally, the context of the present research was the COVID-19 pandemic, that imposed certain measures that may have alternated the normal behaviour of the subjects. It is recommended that a replica of the study will be done in “normal conditions”.

If similar stimuli would be used in future research, it is advised that the profiles include more than one picture of the person, as well as a short description, in order to simulate an authentic experience. If possible, rather than using a self-reporting technique, it can be more insightful to observe the actual behaviour of the users. As shown in previous research, there is a difference between the declared criteria and the used criteria. However, such an approach may raise privacy issues. Lastly, future research can explore more the dynamic between perceived similarity and trustworthiness and analyse more in-depth the role of gender as a moderator.

5.3. Conclusions

The present paper addressed an emerging topic in the landscape of modern social life that of online dating. The importance of the research is not only given by the increasing popularity of such platforms but also by the central role romantic relationships play in an individual's well being. It can be furthered argued that in the particular context created by the COVID-19 pandemic, such platforms have the potential of becoming even more popular among users, offering a safe modality to enter in contact with possible partners. The research concerning human mating is not new, papers as early as 1937 have been written about the particularities of this social behaviour. However, the subdomain of online dating is still emerging, being relatively new and uncharted. Given the mediating nature of technology and the economic and socio-cultural shifts that occurred in the past decade, many papers that were written 30 or 20 years ago are no longer accurate in predicting the current phenomena.

The paper offered a panoramic view of the Romanian users' behaviour on online dating platform. It highlighted the central role played by physical attractiveness in choosing a dating partner, a preference that was argued might be unconscious and instinctual. Furthermore, the role of trustworthiness, similarity and perceived accessibility was uncovered. It has been demonstrated that the criteria regarding the choice of a partner for a long term relationship do not differ from those of choosing a hookup partner, with exception to the trustworthiness dimension, which proved to be more important in the selection of a long term partner, and more relevant for female viewers than for male viewers. Other dimensions were also explored, such as the dynamic between the profile's perceived similarity and the profile's perceived trustworthiness as well as the profile's perceived physical attractiveness and the profile's perceived trustworthiness. Although the effects were statistically significant, they were small.

The final model presented in the paper is a comprehensive one, building on the previous scientific literature, and including new variables such as romantic motivation and perceived accessibility. Thus it offers a better understanding of an expanding human behaviour that is expected to increase in frequency in the future. It also provides a stepping stone for future research that can elaborate on the shortcomings of the current scientific endeavour.

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Appendix A: Romanian Questionnaire

Bună! Numele meu este Alexandra Ciușescu și studiez științele comunicării la Universitatea din Twente (Olanda). În prezent colectez răspunsuri pentru lucrarea mea de dizertație, subiectul cercetării fiind: identificarea elementelor care influențează modul în care utilizatorii își aleg partenerul pe rețelele de online dating (eg. Tinder, Grinder, Ok Cupid etc.). În următoarele 5 minute, te voi ruga să te uiți la profilul fictiv al unei persoane iar mai apoi, să răspunzi la câteva înrebări. Participarea este complet voluntară prin urmare esti liber oricand sa te oprești din a completa acest chestionar. Mai mult de atât, toate răspunsurile sunt anonime prin urmare nimeni, nici măcar eu, nu voi ști ce ai răspuns și nu vei putea fi identificat în funcție de răspunsurile tale.

☐ Înțeleg cele prezentate mai sus și sunt de acord să particip la cercetare

1. Folosești sau ai folosit in trecut aplicații/ platforme online pentru a-ți găsi un partener/ pe cineva cu care să ieși la o întâlnire

- ☐ Folosesc în prezent aceste aplicații/platforme
- ☐ Am folosit aceste aplicații/platforme
- ☐ Nu am folosit niciodată aceste aplicații/platforme

2. De obicei folosești aceste platforme pentru:

- ☐ A-ți găsi un partener romantic pe termen lung
- ☐ A găsi pe cineva cu care să faci sex fără obligații (one night stand/ hook-up)

3. Ce aplicații folosești de obicei pentru a găsi pe cineva cu care să ieși la o întâlnire? (poți selecta mai multe opțiuni)

- ☐ Tinder
- ☐ Badoo
- ☐ Bumble
- ☐ Ok Cupid
- ☐ Facebook
- ☐ Grinder
- ☐ E-harmony
- ☐ Coffee meets baggle
- ☐ Alta....

4. Ești de naționalitate română?

- ☐ da
- ☐ nu

5. Care este etnia ta?

- ☐ Etnie romana
- ☐ Etnie maghiara

- Etnie roma
- Etnie ucrainiana
- Etnie germana
- Alta etnie...

6. Vârsta mea este:

7. Ultimul ciclu de educație absolvit

- Studii gimnaziale
- studii liceale
- Studii post liceale
- Studii universitare- licența
- Studii universitare- master
- Studii universitare- doctorat
- Studii post doctorale

8. Momentan sunt:

- Student
- Student angajat
- Student in căutarea unui loc de munca
- Caut de munca
- Angajat
- Șomer
- Prefer să nu răspund

9. Sunt:

- Femeie
- Bărbat
- Non-binary
- Prefer să nu răspund

10. Care sunt elementele de care ții cont atunci când alegi să ieși la o întâlnire cu cineva de pe rețelele de online dating?

11. Atunci când cauți un partener romantic, de obicei ești interesat(ă) să întâlnești:

- Femei
- Bărbați
- Ambele

Te rog uita-te cu atenție la următorul profil

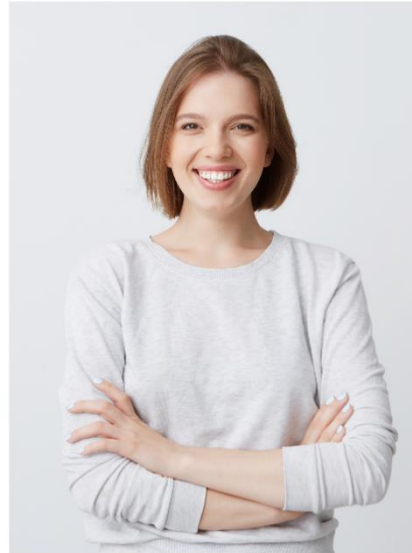


Andrei (21)

Bs. Marketing și Publicitate la Universitatea București
Specialist în comunicare la Pub.ro
5 km

INTERESE

Sport Fotografie Citit Netflix Calatorii



Andreea (21)

Bs. Marketing și Publicitate la Universitatea București
Specialist în comunicare la Pub.ro
5 km

INTERESE

Sport Fotografie Citit Netflix Calatorii

Te rog să evaluezi următoarele afirmații. Nu există răspunsuri corecte sau greșite, ești încurajat să îți folosești intuiția și să oferi primul răspuns care îți vine.

1. Dacă aș fi interesat(a) să ies la o întâlnire, aș întreba persoana din imagine dacă vrea să iasă cu mine
2. I-aș trimite mesaj persoanei din imagine pentru a o cunoaște mai bine
3. Aș fi încântat(a) dacă persoana din imagine ar încerca să vorbească cu mine
4. Aș răspunde persoanei din imagine dacă ar flirta cu mine
5. Mi-ar plăcea ca persoana din imagine să mă invite la o întâlnire
6. Mi-ar plăcea ca persoana din imagine să îmi trimită un mesaj
7. I-aș da persoanei din imagine numărul meu de telefon
8. Cred că persoana din imagine este destul de chipeșă / frumoasă
9. Persoana din imagine arată foarte sexy
10. Cred că persoana din imagine este atractiv(a) din punct de vedere fizic
11. Nu îmi place modul în care persoana din imagine arată

12. Persoana din imagine este urât(a)
13. Persoana din imagine arată foarte bine
14. Persoana din imagine pare sinceră
15. Persoana din imagine pare de încredere
16. Persoana din imagine pare demnă de respect
17. Persoana din imagine pare a avea un comportament adecvat în societate, moral
18. Persoana din imagine pare a urma principii etice
19. Persoana din imagine pare falsă
20. Este ușor pentru mine să întâlnesc persoana din imagine în viața reală (offline)
21. Cred că îmi este ușor să călătoresc pentru a întâlni persoana din imagine
22. Cred că m-aș putea întâlni frecvent cu persoana din imagine în viața reală
23. Cred că aș putea interacționa frecvent cu persoana din imagine în mediu online (mesaje, comentarii, rețele de socializare)
24. Cred că aș putea vorbi des la telefon cu cealaltă persoană
25. Este dificil pentru mine să întâlnesc în viața reală (offline) persoana din imagine atunci când îmi doresc
26. Dacă ar fi să fi să ne întâlnim cred că persoana din imagine mi-ar răspunde cu greu la mesaje
27. Dacă ar fi să ne întâlnim cred că persoana din imagine mi-ar răspunde cu greu la apeluri.
28. Cred că persoana din imagine are o personalitate diferită față de a mea
29. Am anumite trăsături de personalitate similare cu persoana din imagine
30. Cred că am aceleași viziuni politice ca persoana din imagine
31. Persoana din imagine are aceleași viziuni religioase/spirituale ca mine
32. Persoana din imagine are aceleași hobby-uri ca mine
33. Cred că persoana din imagine este interesată de aceleași lucruri ca mine
34. Mie și persoanei din imagine ne plac aceleași lucruri
35. Cred că eu și persoana din imagine am putea face parte din aceleași grupuri
36. Cred că persoana din poză are aceleași convingeri ca mine
37. Persoana din imagine are atitudini diferite în comparație cu mine