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“You’ve been on my mind ever since”: A content analysis of expressions of interpersonal attraction in Craigslist.org’s Missed Connections posts

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how interpersonal attraction was described in Craigslist.org’s Missed Connections postings via a quantitative content analysis of randomly selected posts in the United States. Results indicated that, as predicted, Missed Connections postings contained a combination of multiple verbal (e.g., spoken interactions that are not greetings or praise/compliments) and nonverbal (e.g., physical attractiveness, eye contact, nonverbal body movements) attraction expressions; these posts included an average of just over two attraction expressions. Physical attractiveness was the most frequently expressed form of interpersonal attraction. There were no biological sex or sexual orientation differences in relation to which and how many attraction expressions were included in Missed Connections posts. Implications for attraction and online personal advertisement research are described.

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In 1996, Craig Newmark launched the website www.craigslist.org (hereafter referred to as Craigslist), which is used by 60 million Americans per month (Craigslist.org, 2015) and is the 12th most visited website in the United States (Alexa.com, 2015). Craigslist is a free, open (i.e., not requiring registration or a central administrator moderating content), community-specific, online domain for placing and responding to classified advertisements for jobs, products and houses for sale/rent, participating in discussion forums, and meeting and connecting with others. This computer-mediated marketplace is an influential one; [Kroft and Pope \(2014\)](#), for example, demonstrated that, in metropolitan areas where Craigslist has effectively “crowded out” traditional newspaper job and housing rental listings, the number of job openings and the home rental vacancy rate were reduced by 7% and 10%, respectively.

One unique Craigslist section, “Missed Connections,” originated in 2000 after Craigslist employees noticed a growing number of “I saw you” posts in their personal advertisements ([Lee, 2005](#)). In these Missed Connections (MC) posts, individuals seek out others with whom they briefly had face-to-face encounters and found attractive, but with whom they did not exchange contact information. MC posters describe in varying levels of detail the fleeting interaction that they shared in the hopes of a second chance to reconnect with that person. The interactants in MC posts are usually strangers or the briefest of acquaintances, and their encounters typically involve only basic verbal information or are primarily nonverbal in nature.

Like personal advertisements (e.g., [Lynn & Bolig, 1985](#)), MC posts are an unobtrusive, naturalistic environment in which to examine what attracts individuals to one another. Though Craigslist does not release data regarding which of its pages are most popular, nor do we know exactly how many posts have successfully connected individuals, the Missed Connections section of Craigslist’s website receives significant public attention and is the subject of intense cultural curiosity in the United States. Namely, MC posts are frequently-covered topics in major newspapers and on popular websites (e.g., [Lee, 2005](#); [McCarthy, 2010](#); [Moye, 2015](#)) and are of interest to artists ([Blackall, 2011](#)) and filmmakers ([Robertson, 2010](#)). MC posts as a method of establishing a relationship also reflect current trends, wherein 11% of all American adults, and 38% who

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are single and interested in a relationship, have sought a partner via online dating or mobile dating apps (Smith & Duggan, 2013).

MC online posts thus offer an ideal set of attraction messages to study for three reasons: (1) they are culturally popular messages that (2) comprise a combination of initial face-to-face interaction and subsequent computer-mediated communication to initiate and then attempt to re-establish contact. Third, the MC post “formula” typically includes descriptions of the details of an interaction and expressions of sexual or romantic interest (Brubaker, 2009). As such, our goal is to examine the content of Craigslist MC posts for expressions of interpersonal attraction, and to determine if these attraction expressions vary by poster biological sex and sexual orientation.

1. Interpersonal attraction at zero acquaintance

We view a Craigslist MC post as an online personal advertisement that is distinctive in that the interactants have already engaged in a zero acquaintance interaction. According to Albright, Kenny, and Malloy (1988), zero acquaintance interactions occur when individuals have no prior knowledge of, or opportunity to interact with, another person. Research has determined that, though these first impressions are only moderately accurate, individuals are highly confident in their judgments (Ames, Kammrath, Suppes, & Bolger, 2009). The combination of a positive first impression and being highly confident about that impression are what likely spur individuals to turn to Craigslist to write a MC post to seek further contact.

Physical appearance cues are readily available at zero acquaintance and thus assist in the formation of initial perceptions (Albright et al., 1988). Judgments based on physical appearance cues are particularly inaccurate (Olivola & Todorov, 2010). However, a review of online dating profile research found that individuals were likely to make contact with people whose online dating profiles they found to be physically attractive, warm, and competent (Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012). These findings suggest that those who write an MC post are also likely do so because they found the other individual to be interpersonally attractive (i.e., they were drawn to that person and would like to get to know them; Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2011; Riggio, Widaman, Tucker, & Salinas, 1991) at zero acquaintance and seek further contact because they believe that their attraction may be reciprocated.

Across studies, multiple verbal and nonverbal (e.g., fashionable appearance, friendly facial expression, pleasantness of voice) cues at zero acquaintance are found to positively predict attraction and liking (e.g., Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2010, 2011; Moore, 2010; Muehlenhard, Koralewski, Andrews, & Burdick, 1986; Riggio et al., 1991). Physical attractiveness is consistently the strongest predictor of attraction (Feingold, 1990; Luo & Zhang, 2009; Riggio et al., 1991; Sprecher, 1989), and also predicts sociability, being talkative and good-natured (Albright et al., 1988), and positive first impressions and romantic/dating desirability (Hall, Cody, Jackson, & Flesh, 2008; Riggio et al., 1991). Together, these studies suggest that individuals who are motivated to write an MC post because of their positive, highly confident first impression and interpersonal attraction toward someone they interacted with at zero acquaintance will follow the customary MC formula (Brubaker, 2009) and likewise describe a variety of verbal and nonverbal forms of attraction in their MC posts. Further, physical attractiveness should be the most frequent attraction expression, because it is obvious, “requires minimal cognitive resources to assess” (Finkel et al., 2012, p. 32), and is associated with other positive qualities and romantic potential. As such, in order to extend these patterns of zero acquaintance and interpersonal attraction research findings to the

Craigslist Missed Connection online message, our first two hypotheses state:

H1. Missed Connections posts will contain verbal and nonverbal expressions of attraction, with physical attractiveness being the most frequently mentioned attraction expression.

H2. Missed Connections posts will contain multiple (i.e., an average of more than one) expressions of attraction.

2. Personal advertisements on Craigslist

The free, anonymous, online nature of Craigslist offers “an appealing and accessible venue for potential interpersonal connections, limited only by one’s ability to access the Internet” (Farr, 2011, p. 496). Despite this appeal, there are only a handful of known empirical analyses of MC post content. First, Brubaker and Hayes (2011) compare and contrast Facebook and Craigslist Missed Connection posts as two prominent social media examples of digital representations of actual, lived interpersonal relationships. Compared to Facebook, MC posts are simpler, lack user data that are persistent or formal, require authentication due to their anonymity, and highlight physical locations (Brubaker & Hayes, 2011). Despite these differences, these authors conclude that both online spaces “capture and represent data about the physical world in a virtual format, enabling new kinds of interactions and altering the socio-technical experiences of their users.” (p. 9).

Second, in *Psychology Today* magazine, an examination of 5000 U.S. MC posts – 100 from each state – determined that the primary locations of these initial encounters included Wal-Mart, the gym, and the supermarket (Gambrell, 2013). Further, males sought females in 59% and males in 27% of the MC posts, respectively (Gambrell, 2013). A third study also focused on location, using Chicago-based MC post content to geocode and digitally map the postings (Stafford, 2012). Specifically, Stafford (2012) determined that posts written by males seeking females most commonly originated from public transit, bars, and restaurants, and the most frequent locales in males seeking males posts were bars, gyms, and public transit. Together, these studies highlight the intersection of relationships, physical place, and computer-mediated communication, with MC postings representing one way that individuals communicate and actively seek partners “in the digital boundaries that are becoming ever so powerful” (Stafford, 2012, p. 67). However, these studies do not offer us insight into the specific goal of MC posts: to seek an individual to whom the poster experienced some level of interpersonal attraction.

There is also a small body of research on Craigslist personal advertisements. Craigslist personal advertisements, of which MC posts are a subset, are appealing because they are free to post or view, have no space/length limitations, can be easily searched by keyword or location, and allow individuals to easily, anonymously connect via email (Rosenbaum, Daunt, & Jiang, 2013). Craigslist personal advertisement studies have examined male use of Craigslist to meet male sex partners (Groves & Crow, 2012), safe sex behaviors (e.g., Chan & Ghose, 2014; Haimson, Brubaker, & Hayes, 2014; Moskowitz & Seal, 2010), and the content of heterosexual and homosexual posts (Farr, 2011; Rosenbaum et al., 2013). Biological sex and sexual orientation are two areas of interest in interpersonal attraction and Craigslist online personal advertisement research, and Brubaker (2009) notes that contextual information in MC posts frequently includes biological sex and sexual orientation. Stafford (2012) observed biological sex and sexual orientation differences in the physical locations where MC posters initially met and interacted. Thus, we also consider each below in relation to MC post interpersonal attraction messages.

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