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**Predicting Relational Outcomes:
An Investigation of Thin Slice Judgments in Speed Dating**

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Abstract

Many relational scholars suggest relational closeness may be determined during initial interaction (Berg & Clark, 1986; Duck, 1995). Speed dating (Deyo & Deyo, 2002) creates opportunities for rapid evaluations and thin slicing (Ambady, Bernieri, & Richeson, 2000) supports the notion that mere moments can predict relational outcomes and provides opportunities to understand relational components determining positive/negative assessments in speed-dating. Predicted outcome value (POV) offers a lens for understanding evaluations determining the most rewarding relationships (Sannafrank, 1986). Actual speed dating participants (n=157) evaluated and provided descriptive rationale for their evaluations according to the valence of their predicted outcomes.

Predicting Relational Outcomes: An Investigation of Thin Slice Judgments in Speed Dating

Can a decision made in a few seconds be as strong as a decision taking weeks or even years? Most people would say no. However, others would claim these instant decisions are consistent with time-intensive contemplations. For example, one author writes “Decisions made very quickly can be every bit as good as decisions made cautiously and deliberately” (Gladwell, 2005, p. 14). This is a very bold claim from a book written for popular press, yet despite its mainstream nature, the powerful words written by Gladwell (2005) offer much to consider and carry significant empirical support. In fact, researchers suggest people can form accurate impressions from mere glimpses of behavior (Allport, 1937; Goffman, 1979). Recent research has referred to this phenomenon as thin slicing (Ambady, Bernieri, & Richeson, 2000). A thin slice is defined as: “a brief excerpt of expressive behavior sampled from the behavioral stream” (Ambady et al., 2000, p. 203). The aim of the present study was to investigate thin slicing and the ability to predict relational outcomes in a specific relational decision-making context: speed dating.

Born out of the desire to make Jewish dating easier, speed dating typically occurs in a round robin format with six to twelve possible dates lasting anywhere from three-to-eight minutes (Deyo & Deyo, 2002; Spear, 2005). The principle question driving this investigation was: What are indicators of positive or negative outcome predictions in a thin slice judgment, or the initial thirty seconds, of a speed date? This study is important for three key reasons. First, thin slicing has been unexplored by communication scholars, despite its direct relation to the discipline. Second, speed dating provides an entirely new investigative context for relational scholars. Finally, within this new context it is possible this heuristically provocative variable informs current relational communication theory.

Review of Literature

Speed Dating

Today’s fast-paced American lifestyle has forced new and creative methods for meeting potential romantic partners. Speed dating has become a matchmaking craze sweeping the country (Farouky and Smith, 2003). It has become a popular venue for today’s singles as it provides daters quick access to a large number of potential mates in a single evening. Speed dating has gained popularity in the United States and around the globe in places such as the United Kingdom, India, Australia, and Canada (Chen & Marr, 2005; Spear, 2005). It is very different from the typical bar scene and even online dating as up to twelve men and twelve women sign up for events based on specific criteria (i.e., age range, lifestyle, etc.) established by the dating organization. Participants typically gather in a restaurant armed with nametags and evaluation forms and pair up to begin dating. After six minutes (time varies with the dating organization) of conversation a bell rings and the men move on to the next table; women stay seated for their next date. Couples keep track of their 6-minute perceptions of each date on evaluation forms by recording thoughts and indicating whether they would like an opportunity to meet this person again. The speed dating coordinator later determines mutual interest and, if this is the case, shares email addresses with participants to enable a future meeting.

Rabbi Yaacov Deyo developed speed dating as a way for Jewish singles to date and to follow the principles underlying Jewish dating traditions (Deyo & Deyo, 2002). Since its creation, companies like Cupid.com (one of the three largest speed dating companies in the world) host monthly events in over 100 U. S. cities with nearly 4,000 daters per month (Cupid.com/PreDating). Though research on this new dating environment is scant,

commonalities among the attributes highly valued by participants have been found to exist. For example, after the allotted time (six-eight minutes) Kurzban and Weeden (2005) indicated specific physical appearance attributes (i.e., attractiveness, height, and body mass index) were positively correlated with date selection, while other attributes such as religion and education, initially indicated as important, revealed no correlation with selection. How participants develop criteria for matches and assess their respective value in six to eight minutes remains unknown. Could it be individuals need even less time to determine the positive or negative possibilities of a future relationship? Thin slicing research may provide the link to understanding partner selection and the eventual success of speed dating.

Thin Slicing

Thin slicing is not a new variable under investigation in the social sciences; however it has not always been examined under this title. Similar relational communication concepts may fall under the headings of “stereotype activation” (Banaji & Greenwald, 1994; Bodenhausen & Macrae, 1998; Lepore & Brown, 1997) “expectancy effects” (Burgoon & LePoire, 1993), or “self-fulfilling prophecies” (Jussim, 1991; Rosenthal, 1973). Contemporary research in thin slicing has been conceptualized and championed by Ambady (Ambady et al., 2000; Ambady, Conner, & Hallahan, 1999; Ambady & Gray, 2002; Ambady, LaPlante, Ngyuen, Rosenthal, Chaumenton, & Levinson, 2002; Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992, 1993) and typically explained as an experience based on verbal and nonverbal cues experienced in less than five minutes (Ambady et al., 2000). The most compelling aspect of the thin slice construct is the accuracy and reliability of the judgments made during these brief encounters (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992).

Thin slice judgments have been examined in a variety of contexts. Research shows that strangers have been able to generate accurate personality judgments about extraversion, openness, and conscientiousness solely based on a brief viewing of strangers’ bedrooms and offices (Gosling, Jin Ko, Morris, & Mannarelli, 2002). Racial bias, for example, was accurately detected by black participants based on a twenty-second thin slice of nonverbal behavior (Richeson & Shelton, 2005). In another study involving thin slice video clips of homosexual and heterosexual men and women, participants were able to accurately identify the sexual orientation of targets (Berger, Hank, Rauzi, & Simkins, 1987).

Thin slicing has also been studied extensively within the education context. In a study of teacher’s differential treatment of students high and low in achievement, the students (unfamiliar with the teacher and pupils) were able to significantly identify a teacher’s differential behavior based on ten second clips of their nonverbal communication behavior. Moreover, these judgments matched evaluations of the teacher’s actual students (Babad, 2005). Another study investigated teachers’ nonverbal behaviors and expectancy effects by having participants view ten second clips of teachers talking to and about students with whom they had high and low expectations. Based on these thin slices, teachers were able to accurately judge negative affect toward low expectation students (Babad, Bernieri, & Rosenthal, 1989). Results of a study conducted in the college classroom revealed six-to-fifteen second silent video clips of teachers yielded accurate judgments from participants that were consistent with end of semester evaluations from the teachers’ actual students (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993).

Researchers have also begun coding conversational thin slices to make predictions. Specifically, coding based on four conversational features in a negotiation context was predictive/indicative of negotiation outcomes (Curhan, Pentlad, Caneel, Eagle, & Martin, 2005). Perhaps the most well-known coding that could be incorporated within the concept of thin slicing was conducted by Gottman in the marital context (Carrere & Gottman, 1999; Gottman &

Levenson, 1992). A most intriguing result of this programmatic research was the ability to accurately predict divorce over a six year period based on three minutes of a conversation (Carrere & Gottman, 1999).

Noting the reliability of thin slice judgments, scholars have also begun isolating certain mediums or channels to determine impact. Specifically, research has indicated people can form accurate judgments based on isolated mediums (Ambady et al, 2002; Frable, 1987; Linville, 1998). For example, Linville (1998) isolated the vocal channel of heterosexual and homosexual men and found participants were able to successfully identify sexual orientation based on 90 second vocal cues. A similar study found participants able to accurately determine surgeons' placement in either a "claims" or "no-claims" malpractice category based on 40 seconds of hearing surgeons speak, while controlling for content (Ambady et al, 2002). Additional research appears to support the notion that visual and nonverbal communication channels are the most telling in developing accurate thin slice judgments (Grahe & Bernieri, 1999). The role these channels play in positive or negative outcomes in the speed dating context, however, is unknown. When individuals are facing a ticking clock, in a noisy, fast-paced "meet-and-greet" environment, can they comprehend their immediate perceptions? Does the thin slicing concept transfer to the speed dating context?

Theoretical Frame

Researchers have long explained that one of the most fundamental communication behaviors is the attempt to reduce uncertainty and sequentially increase relational predictability (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Sunnafrank, 1986). The theory of predicted outcome value (POV) proposes that potential relational partners assess the outcome of a future relationship (Sunnafrank, 1986; 1990). In settings with multiple potential partners (i.e., speed dating) attempts are made to develop the most rewarding and cost effective relationship—excluding those less rewarding (Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004). This may be especially significant during a speed dating event when participants are encouraged to decide immediately whether or not to continue the interaction in the future.

Scholars have continued to support the possibility that relational closeness may be determined during initial interactions (Berg & Clark, 1986; Duck, 1995). Research on predicted outcomes (POV) and uncertainty reduction (URT) have revealed a reliance on rapid assessments during (and sometimes even prior to) initial communication (Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004). Other studies have tested POV (Sunnafrank, 1986) and reported the value of initial impressions in assessing costs/rewards of future interactions. Bippus, Kearney, Plax, and Brooks (2003) reported college students assessed the positive or negative rewards of extra class communication (ECC) with teachers. These initial evaluations led them to either seek or avoid out of class communication. Mottet (2000) reported knowing an individual's sexual orientation in an initial encounter produced a negative POV and, perhaps even more revealing, men predicted significantly more negative outcome values than women. More recently initial POV among relational dyads in a basic communication course emerged as the primary predictor of attraction, type of relationship, amount of communication and relationship proximity (Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004). In other words, the initial impressions had lasting effects, whether positive or negative. How long it took to create these impressions, however, was not examined.

POV remains an important theory in interpersonal communication as it helps explain and predict communication behavior. Sunnafrank's program of research (1986, 1988, 1990) creates an understanding of the elements to which individuals attend in order to form the value impressions that lead to developing or avoiding future interactions. In this study, the theory of

predicted outcome value may provide a lens for understanding the specific interpersonal attraction traits and characteristics advanced during thin slicing evaluations in speed dating. It will be important, therefore, to determine if mere moments allow enough opportunity to solidify positive or negative perceptions. Therefore, the following two research questions were created:

RQ1: What themes of interpersonal attraction emerge from thin slice judgments of participants in the speed dating environment?

RQ2: What thin slicing themes lead to positive or negative judgments?

Method

Data was collected from multiple speed dating events in two large southern cities over a six month period. The participants in this real sample of speed daters consisted of 157 participants ($n=157$) and included 82 men and 75 women ranging from 25 to 60 years of age (Male $M=37$; Female $M=34$). At these particular speed dating events, subjects participated in six minute dates. As is common with speed dating, all participants were initially assigned a number and each was supplied with an evaluation form where he/she could report impressions and request a subsequent date with his/her speed dating partner. These forms were filled out at the conclusion of each date.

As part of this study, prior to the sixth date of the evening a request was made for individuals to participate in the study. At this point, each person was instructed to make an initial 30 second introduction with their sixth speed dating partner. Once this happened, each person was asked to temporarily pause their date and move to another location in the room. Researchers handed each dater a brief form asking them to report three pieces of information regarding their 30 second impressions of the sixth date. This format was designed to gather participants' thin slice judgments and, ultimately, what did or did not lead to initial attraction and future dating expectations. First, participants were asked to report on a closed-ended question: "How do you feel about this person you just met—positive or negative?" Second, participants were asked to provide open-ended qualitative responses as to why they described their responses as positive or negative. Finally, participants were asked to report their sex and age. All participants were initially informed the research was voluntary and signed a consent form. This form detailed their rights as human subjects, the purpose of the study, expected time requirements, assurance of anonymity, and contact information. The researchers obtained IRB approval, guarding the rights and safety of human research subjects.

Data was organized by sex and judgment valence, which ultimately led to the following four categories: male positive judgment of partner, male negative judgment of partner, female positive judgment of partner, and female negative judgment of partner. Qualitative responses were then coded in order to discover themes among the positive and negative responses. Thematic analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Owen, 1984) enabled researchers to inductively explore the emerging themes within the positive and negative categories as well as the perceptions expressed by sex. Two coders were involved in the consistent comparative analysis of the themes emerging from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Once categorical agreement regarding the aforementioned classification scheme was achieved, coding subsequently took place by these same two ($n=2$) individuals. Intercoder agreement in this initial phase of data analysis achieved an acceptable outcome of .87 (Cohen, 1960). Following subsequent recommendations from Krippendorff (2004), intercoder reliability from this respective phase of coding was .86 (Scott, 1955). Finally, two ($n=2$) different coders who were blind to the study were solicited to further examine the overall reliability of the classification

scheme. Average intercoder agreement and composite reliability from coding all categories of the classification scheme achieved an acceptable reliability of .90 (Scott, 1955).

Results

The thin slice responses were initially divided according to sex and valence of judgment. Of the 157 participants responding to the closed-ended question, the sample was divided as follows: male negative (n=9), female negative (n=18), male positive (n=62), female positive (n=63). Varied positive and negative responses were offered for the open-ended question, and some participants listed multiple descriptive responses to support their evaluations. All were included in the coding. The open-ended responses created the following values: male positive evaluation of partner (n=73), male negative evaluation of partner (n=9), female positive evaluation of partner (n=103), and female negative evaluation of partner (n=24).

Thematic analysis produced several themes within each evaluation category and are reported in Table 1. Male negative judgments of partner produced one major theme: attraction/attractiveness; though a second category of “no response provided” should also be considered. After the 30 second greeting, the attraction theme included things like: “overweight” and “not of an ethnicity I would date.” Female negative judgments of partners after 30 seconds revealed the following three themes: can’t provide a reason, no attraction, and negative qualities. “Can’t provide a reason” included things like “hard to say” and obvious blank responses. “No attraction” included things like: “not my type,” “not Caucasian,” and “too short.” The negative qualities after 30 seconds included things like “a bit jittery,” “needed repeated responses,” and “self-centered.”

Male positive judgments of partners after 30 seconds included the following four themes: no reason developed, physical attraction, friendly, and positive qualities/behaviors. Frequencies for the positive categories are reported in Table 1. “No reason developed” included blank responses and statements like, “hard to say.” The “physical attraction” theme included statements such as “attractive,” “pretty,” and “cute.” “Friendly” included responses like “seems friendly” and “friendly.” The final theme, “positive qualities/behaviors” included behaviors descriptive of their female partners’ communication. These communication behaviors were divided into five sub-themes: nice, positive demeanor/personality, positive communication, fun, and other. The sub-theme “positive communication” included responses like “good communication,” “pleasant conversationalist” and “eye contact.” The sub-theme “nice” included responses like “very nice” and “polite.” “Positive demeanor/personality” included responses like “bubbly” and “because she is giggly.” The “other” sub-theme included comments such as “open-minded” and “straightforward.”

The positive female partner responses after 30 seconds revealed five separate themes. The frequencies for these themes are located in Table 1. The first theme was “attractive” and included comments such as “nice looking” and “attractive.” The theme referencing their male partner’s “smile” included comments such as “nice smile,” “great smile,” and “friendly smile.” The “friendly” theme included “friendly” and “very friendly.” Statements for the theme “funny” were most often reported simply as “funny.” As with the male positive responses, the final 30 second theme for females, “positive qualities/demeanor,” was divided into three sub-themes: seems nice, positive communication, and positive qualities. The sub-theme “seems nice” explicitly included “seems nice.” “Positive communication” included responses most often referring to conversation skills and nonverbal communication behaviors. Lastly, “positive

Table 1: Male and Female Positive and Negative Speed Dating Themes

Positive	
Male (n=73)	Female (n=103)
No response given – 9	No response given – 3
Positive Communication Behaviors – 33	Positive Communication Behaviors – 43
Seems/Talks Nice – 10	Positive Personality Qualities – 22
Good Demeanor/Personality – 8	Good Communication – 14
Good Communication – 8	Seems/Talks Nice – 7
Seems Fun – 5	Physical Attraction – 16
Other – 2	Nice Looking – 3
Physical Attraction – 18	Attractive – 2
Attractive – 5	Clean Cut – 2
Pretty – 5	Pretty Eyes – 2
Cute – 2	Pleasant Face – 1
Other – 6	Tall – 1
Friendly – 13	Like His Black Hair – 1
Friendly Attitude – 10	Neatly Groomed – 1
Friendly Face – 1	Handsome – 1
Seems Friendly – 2	Kind of Cute – 1
	Stylish Clothing – 1
	Smile – 23
	Great, Cute, Nice Smile – 22
	Nervous, but Warm Smile – 1
	Friendly – 12
	Funny – 6
	Funny – 4
	Sense of Humor – 1
	Wit – 1
Negative	
Male (n=9)	Female (n=24)
No response given – 1	No response given – 3
Attraction – 8	Attraction – 12
Weight – 2	Physical Appearance – 5
Race/Ethnicity – 2	Not My Type – 5
Not Attracted to Them – 4	Other – 2
	Negative Qualities – 9
	Negative Personality – 5
	Negative Communication Skills – 3
	Other – 1

qualities” included responses like “nice demeanor,” “good energy,” and “good personality.” The abundance of the positive themes after the 30 second thin slice was readily apparent.

Discussion

The aim of this investigation was two-fold. The first goal was to discover themes of interpersonal attraction emerging from thin slice judgments, or the first thirty seconds, of a speed date. This study provides a “jumping-off point” for research in this context as no research in this, or any other dating environment, has evaluated the ability of individuals to determine the valence and rationale of perceptions after only 30 seconds. Secondly, in order to predict the future outcome value (POV) of the speed dating relationship it was important to uncover the particular themes leading to positive or negative evaluations. In other words, what are the essential elements determining relational prospects in an environment where single individuals are forced to come to rapid conclusions of partners while being timed and observed by a room full of strangers? This new matchmaking technique is relatively unexplored by relational scholars, thus, little is known in regard to the communication behaviors males and females value in this particular dating context. POV proposes that potential relational partners assess the outcome of a future relationship (Sunnafrank, 1986; 1990). If individuals in the speed dating environment are expected to decide, in brief moments, the most rewarding and cost effective relationship (Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004), what are the primary indicators? The emerging thin slice themes in this study could be especially revealing for relational researchers as attraction indicators and dating morph into new and different forms.

Lack of attraction or negative physical qualities were the primary drivers of both female and male negative judgments, though females reported nearly three times the negative evaluations compared to males. This may indicate female speed daters are quicker to note male negative characteristics, are more critical, or perhaps enter the environment with more specific and heightened standards. With the difference in these results, males could be perceived as more open-minded or at least slower to address the negative physical characteristics. At least it does not appear to readily occur in 30 seconds. However, an important element to note is that “attractiveness” was the only negative category emerging for males, suggesting this as the primary indicator of their negative thin slice judgment. They latch onto the more superficial characteristics when perceptions are negative in the first 30 seconds.

On the other hand, two major similarities for positive judgments emerged for males and females. Both sexes were nearly identical in their positive evaluations of the opposite sexes’ physical attractiveness and positive behavior and demeanor. In fact, both groups stated positive communication behaviors such as good communication skills, acting nice, and being nonverbally responsive were highly valued and necessary for positive prospective dates. This could be considered a bonus for communication scholars when after a mere 30 seconds the most positive and expected characteristics were communication-based. Though both reported positive evaluations of physical attractiveness, women were much more specific in detailing attractiveness characteristics. Men were basic, with limited descriptors such as “cute” and “pretty,” while women specified things like “clean cut,” “stylish clothing,” “nice eyes,” and “neatly groomed.” In regard to specific attractiveness elements, it could be important to recognize what women focus on in 30 seconds. These very specific elements and criteria could prove useful to dating agencies offering advice to those hoping to have successful speed dating experiences.

Both men and women revealed “friendliness” as a valuable positive personal characteristic, but women especially reported an appreciation for a great “smile” from their male speed dating partners. As this may even fall under a dual heading of friendliness and attractiveness, in future studies it might be helpful to determine just how women classify a “great

smile.” It appears, by the varied “smile descriptors” they may receive differential interpretations. In fact women reported a “cute smile,” “friendly smile,” and a “warm, accepting smile” as positive predictors in the first 30 seconds of their dates. This also suggests it is an important immediacy behavior (Mehrabian, 1971) and definitely an initial attraction criterion for females.

Overall, there were many more positive judgments across the sexes, suggesting a possible halo effect for daters attending speed dating events. It may be that the fast-paced, close environment encourages more positive responses due to “expectancy effects” (Burgoon & LePoire, 1993), or “self-fulfilling prophecies” (Jussim, 1991; Rosenthal, 1973) for the dating experience. Daters could, in fact, feel pressured to be more approving as 12 sets of eyes are upon them in a short time span. Another possibility could be the circumstances that led them to speed date in the first place. Many daters expressed to the researchers in the current study that they could “not believe they were doing this” and considered it their “last hope for getting a date” as their hectic lives allowed little time for socializing. The possibility of this “situational pressure” could alter many of the commonly accepted elements (e.g., task, social, and physical) of interpersonal attraction (McCroskey & McCain, 1974) that predict relational outcome values.

On the other hand, the fact that more positive evaluations of prospective dates emerged could be an indicator of the type of person engaging in speed dating. Could this be a means of last resort dating for individuals who have no time to socialize via more “normal” dating (e.g., parties, blind dates, clubs, etc.)? Might these participants be inclined to overlook many questionable or negative characteristics for fear of being alone or, at least, leaving with no future prospects? If this is the case, is the predicted outcome value useful or even assessable? Could desperation overrule logical thought processes? These are certainly important questions to consider in this new dating context if we hope to discover evaluative criteria predictive of future relationships.

This study offers initial insight into what attracts males and females to one another in a new dating realm and within the thin slicing frame. Members of the opposite sex meet briefly in a noisy, fast-paced environment, but does speed dating afford enough time to arrive at a well-developed decision—to carefully predict the valence of their date? This study evaluated the 30 second thin slice judgments of individuals to determine the predominant elements of attraction leading to positive dating prospects. The greatest value was placed on positive responses describing behavioral and communication characteristics and revealing social traits as emerging more frequently. Elements of physical attractiveness were also positively evaluated by both sexes, though women were enamored even more with the male smile. The physical components of each sex were also the primary indicators of negative responses. This is hardly surprising. One can expect adverse responses toward those who are overweight, of another race, or who otherwise exhibit unattractive physical characteristics (Kleinke & Kahn, 1980; Peretti & Abplanalp, 2004).

An important area for future research would be to compare these findings to measures of social and physical attraction (McCroskey, McCroskey, & Richmond, 2006) after six minutes in the speed dating context to see if the assigned valence is maintained over time. Perhaps other elements of attraction, such as task components, emerge later in the dating experience. Homophily, or similarity between couples may also play a role over a longer period of time. Thirty seconds is hardly enough time to establish background or attitude similarities. However, thin slicing research would suggest quickly made decisions are often as accurate, valuable, and predictive as cautious and deliberately made ones (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992; Gladwell, 2005).

Perhaps these findings, then, call into question the value of careful evaluations of attraction and homophily when individuals need only brief glimpses to form their impressions.

However, the execution of the present study may create certain comparative limitations. Participants, for example could feel a certain predisposition to respond similarly at 30 seconds and six minutes in order to remain consistent. As they were forced to draw a positive or negative conclusion after 30 seconds, perhaps they would feel a sense of dissonance (Festinger, 1957) if judgments were altered even after getting to know the other person better. Another possible limitation to the thin slice evaluation may have occurred due to the close proximity of the individual during the assessment. Participants were asked to greet their sixth date of the evening and then move a short distance from this location to complete the thin slice evaluation form. They may have felt self-conscious if they were evaluating their dating partner negatively—afraid their responses would be detected. This may have prevented completely honest assessments.

Speed dating is a new matchmaking concept creating fertile ground for relational research. Participants are not left on their own to determine who to talk to, where, and for how long. They are carefully guided through the “dating” process and expected to arrive at future dating decisions by the end of an evening. This unorthodox dating concept begs for more research to determine if the interpersonal attraction elements long studied and evaluated continue to be predictors of relational outcome value in this environment. If, as presented in this study, initial communication behaviors such as smiling, good conversational and greeting skills, and nonverbal responses are essential indicators of future relational opportunities, then this should be the focus for singles. Looks may be important, but perhaps presentational skills play a more valuable role in today’s more creative dating environment.

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