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## ANALYZING INTERACTION PATTERNS ON DATING SITES: A GENERIC STRUCTURE POTENTIAL APPROACH

*Opeyemi Emmanuel Olawe*

*University of Ibadan (Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria)*

*oolawe6392@stu.ui.edu.ng*

**Abstract:** Online dating has become a popular stage to find a romantic partner. In such context, interlocutors must employ language carefully to reveal their intentions, attract attention and as well sustain intimacy with their potential partners. While previous studies have explored aspects such as self-disclosure and linguistic strategies in impression formation, there remains a gap in understanding the structured interactions that occur between potential partners on dating sites. This study, therefore, investigated the linguistic elements and interactional structures characterizing online dating discourse, focusing on two popular platforms, Tinder and Tagged. Adopting Halliday and Hasan's Generic Structure Potential framework, the study examined conversations of thirty participants (potential partners) whose relationship ranges between two weeks to three months. Findings revealed seven key stages: Discourse Initiation (DI), Introduction (INTR), Question and Response (QAR), Request (RQ), Admiration (AD), Declaration of Dating Intention (DDI), and Topic Formation for Conversation (TF). Each stage is marked by specific linguistic features and serves unique functions within the communication process. DI involves friendly greetings and endearments to initiate conversation and signal interest. INTR often includes declarative statements that provide personal information, establishing familiarity and a good first impression. QAR facilitates information exchange through questions and responses. RQ, predominantly by males, involves polite modal verb constructions to move the conversation to more personal platforms or obtain further information. AD includes compliments and positive affirmations to express appreciation and create a positive interaction tone. DDI features direct and indirect questions about relationship status to clarify the intent behind the interaction and define the nature of the potential relationship. Finally, TF sustains conversation with statements and questions about daily activities and interests. This study contributes to the broader understanding of professional discourse by analyzing the structured linguistic strategies and interactional patterns employed in online dating, demonstrating how individuals strategically use language to manage impressions, negotiate intentions, and build relationships – skills also crucial in professional communication.

**Keywords:** Generic Structure Potential, interaction patterns, online dating platforms, online dating discourse, genre, online communication.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Language is very important in all human endeavour. Whether for transaction or interaction, language functions significantly in establishing and maintaining social relations and communicating personal attitudes (Brown & Yule, 1983). In human society, language not only enables people to think, inform, share and uncover information, but it is also one of the major tools for initiating and building social relations. Scholars (Okpeadua, 2016; Larson & Asbury, 2018; Zanden et al., 2019) assert that language can be used to contact a relationship, initiate or sustain a conflict.

In the past, conventional methods such as letter writing, intermediaries, and the exchange of flowers and gifts were commonly employed to convey expressions of affection (Thoen, 2006). However, with the advent of technology and the Internet, various contexts through which relationships, whether platonic or romantic, can be initiated have been expanded and one of them is social media. The domain of social media is vast and we can classify them into various typologies based on their functionalities, purposes, and modes of interaction (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). One of the typologies within social media encompasses online dating platforms, which serve as digital spaces for individuals to connect and form romantic relationships. These platforms, such as *Tinder*, *Match.com*, and *OkCupid*, provide users with tools and algorithms to search for potential partners based on various criteria, including interests, preferences, and geographical location. Users create profiles detailing personal information and photos and then engage in interactions such as swiping, messaging, and virtual dating. Online dating platforms offer a unique space for individuals to explore romantic connections in a digital environment, offering convenience and accessibility in the search for love and companionship (Finkel et al., 2012).

Online dating has become a well-known and popular strategy to find a romantic partner. Research shows that the fastest-growing way for potential partners to meet is by online dating. Moreover, 22% of the couples that met in 2015 met online (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2017) and 74% of the singles in the US have signed up for a dating site (Tu et al., 2014). Reasons for the popularity of online dating are the technological changes that have made dating through the Internet available and efficient. The growing computer literacy has made internet dating more socially acceptable (Qaisar et al., 2020). Saleem (2014) observes that dating sites are fast replacing the traditional means of initiating a relationship. As a result of social networking sites that have infiltrated our everyday lives, meeting physically amongst youths in churches, parties, schools, and other areas has been replaced by meeting online. Love cards and messages have been replaced by text messages, pings, smiley symbols, and physical meetings have been replaced by video conferencing, skype and other streaming platforms available online. Dating sites are remodelling the world of love and romance by playing the role of matchmakers. This implies that dating sites will continue to be a medium for people to meet easily, socialize and become acquainted online.

One of the most important elements of a relationship especially in online dating is language. As posited by Lindh (2019) and Pie and Jurgens (2020), language serves a variety of functions in relationships. It can be an index of relationship status, an instrument of relationship maintenance

or change, or the embodiment of essential relationship characteristics such as autonomy and interdependence. Meijer (2014) asserts that language use can severely affect the disposition and impression of online potential partners towards each other. This is more so because online dating is language-based. In face-to-face communication, nonverbal cues such as vocal intonation or gestures account for more of a receiver's perception of a sender's effect than the actual verbal content does (Huang, 2016; Nabila, 2019). In online dating, as in computer-mediated communication in general, such nonverbal cues are absent. Here, linguistic traits of a message, with which a person approaches a target, can serve as signals of the sender's impression and attraction. Ireland, Slatcher, Eastwick, Scissors, Finkel, and Pennebaker (2011) noted that when people in relationships talk to one another, their conversations often serve as the basis of their attraction. Language use and various forms of interaction, according to Jacobson (2007), will help to build a growing intimacy and lessen the uncertainty between two individuals who do not yet know each other well. All these show that language is knitted into the fabric of an intimate relationship, especially in the digital space which is frequently language-based. No doubt, over the years, with the increasing acceptance, popularity and usage of various dating sites, there have been rich scholarly studies committed to the issue of language use on such platforms. Most studies examined the aspect of language error, linguistic behaviours and genuineness (Toma & Hancock, 2012; Meijer, 2014; Zanden, Schouten, Mos & Krahmer, 2019; Zanden, Schouten, Mos, Lee & Krahmer, 2019). Some of the works focused on interaction patterns in an intimate relationship which are different from online dating (Pei & Jurgens, 2020; Robinson et al., 2020; Stasiuk, 2021) while other studies examined the roles of linguistic cues and properties on impression formation, attraction and intimacy (Rosen et al., 2008; Ma et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2019; Nabila, 2019; Lin et al., 2012). Thus, the structure of online dating interaction has not been fully explored and cannot be effectively determined from these studies. Little attention has been devoted to the linguistic approaches that interlocutors employ to interact and negotiate formalities, differences, attachment and intimacy on dating sites. Therefore, this study attempts to fill this gap by cataloguing the patterns that characterize the interactional structure of potential partners on selected dating sites. Specifically, this study attempts to:

- a) catalogue the patterns that characterize the interactional structure of potential partners in online dating discourse;
- b) identify the linguistic elements that characterize the interactional structure of potential partners in online dating discourse.

To achieve the aim, the study provided answers to two key research questions: 1) What are the patterns of interaction among potential partners in online dating discourse? 2) What are the linguistic elements that characterize the interactional structure of potential partners in online dating discourse?

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a linguistically focused approach to examining the structure of online dating interactions. Data were collected from two selected social media dating sites: *Tinder* and *Tagged*. These platforms were purposively chosen due to their popularity among Nigerian youths, which ensures a rich source of interaction data relevant to the study's demographic focus. The study involved thirty participants (potential partners), whose relationships on these platforms ranged from two weeks to three months. These included nineteen participants from *Tinder* and eleven

from Tagged with a mix of genders and ages ranging from 18 to 30 years old. The relatively small sample size was due to the challenge of obtaining consent from users to share their private conversations for research purposes.

Participants were recruited through personal approaches, leveraging existing social networks to identify individuals active on Tinder and Tagged. They were informed about the study's objectives, and consent was obtained to use their conversations for research purposes. Ethical considerations were paramount in this study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were fully informed about the study's purpose and methods. Participation was voluntary and only those who consented and made their chats available were included in the study. Data confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by removing personal identifiers such as names and contact information from the transcriptions and assigning unique codes to each participant. Data were securely stored, with digital files encrypted and physical documents locked away. Access was restricted to the researcher only.

A total of 600 conversations were analyzed, with an average of 20 conversation lines per interaction. Conversations were captured via screenshots, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized to protect participant privacy. The interactions ranged from initial greetings to more detailed exchanges, providing a comprehensive view of the interactional patterns in online dating. The transcriptions were segmented into meaningful units of interaction based on turns and exchanges. Personal identifiers were removed, and each segment was coded according to its functional role in the interaction, such as initiating, responding, or requesting. The coded data were analyzed to identify recurring patterns and structures in the interactions using the Generic Structure Potential (GSP) framework developed by Halliday and Hasan (1985). GSP is a linguistic method used to identify the underlying structure and functional components of interactions in discourse. This approach was chosen because it allows for a detailed examination of the interaction patterns and the ways participants negotiate intentions in online dating contexts.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this study is provided by Halliday and Hasan's (1985) Generic Structure Potential. The Generic Structure Potential (GSP) theory, proposed by Halliday and Hasan (1985), is a framework used to analyze discourse structures across various genres and contexts. It suggests that within any given discourse, there exists a set of potential structures or patterns that speakers or writers can draw upon to organize their communication effectively. These potential structures are not fixed templates but rather flexible frameworks that speakers can adapt based on communicative goals, audience expectations, and contextual factors. The term Generic Structure (GS) is used by systemic linguists to describe functional structures of texts which re-occur often in society. The Generic Structure adds to the meaning of the text which is interpreted based on the stage it is at or what function it serves. Generic structures are socially shared, thus, readers are exposed to multiple instances of generic structure and learn to recognise their structures. The knowledge of the structure of a text makes reading easy as the reader already has an idea of the function of each section (Omoniyi & Akinseye, 2020). Thus, according to Sunday and Fagunleka (2017), generic structure refers to the staging of the genre, its attendant sequencing and formalization within the cultural experience. It is how the elements of a text are arranged to match its purpose.

Halliday and Hassan's genre theory comprises two key elements: the Contextual Configuration (CC) and the Generic Structure Potential. The Contextual Configuration is a systemic concept that interprets the contextual variables of a communicative event, providing essential attributes that define the structure of the text. It delineates the structure of the text by identifying the values of these variables, allowing for statements about its organization. The Generic Structure Potential, introduced by Halliday and Hassan in 1989, refers to the entire range of textual structures available within a particular genre. It addresses the limitations of the contextual configuration by acknowledging potential elements, whether optional, obligatory, or recursive, that may occur in discourse. The Generic Structure Potential encompasses all textual elements relevant to the development of a genre, aiding in the analysis and description of specific applications within a broader classification. Therefore, while the contextual configuration is vital for establishing the structural unity of texts and their relationship with context, the Generic Structure Potential elucidates the possibilities for genre-specific textual development.

The concept of Generic Structure Potential (GSP) outlines both obligatory and optional elements within a genre, as well as the sequence and recursion of these elements. It suggests that a text's generic type is determined by the presence of obligatory elements specific to that genre. Melefa, Amoniyani and Adike (2020), echoing Halliday and Hassan (1985), emphasize the significance of contextual configuration in determining the structural unity of texts and its correlation with the context. They highlight the predictive capabilities of contextual configuration in text structure, including identifying obligatory and optional elements, sequencing, and recursiveness. GSP uses symbols like  $\wedge$ ,  $[ ]$ ,  $( )$ ,  $\{ \}$ , and  $\diamond$  to denote sequence, restriction, optionality, iteration, and recursiveness. These symbols aid in analyzing and understanding text organization, representing how elements are arranged and their stability, flexibility, and repetition within discourse interactions. The GSP serves as a framework for comprehending the structural characteristics of texts and their contextual configurations, providing insights into their organizational patterns.

In the context of online dating discourse, it is important to establish the GSP of online dating interactions to understand the interactional structure of the discourse and to account for the obligatory, optional, and recursive elements, as well as the sequence of these elements. The GSP theory is applied to this study to understand the recurring patterns or structures that shape interactions between individuals on dating platforms. These interactions typically involve the exchange of information, the establishment of rapport, and the negotiation of romantic interest. By examining the generic structure potential of online dating discourse, this study identifies common patterns of communication and analyzes how users employ these structures to achieve their communicative objectives.

#### 4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The interaction patterns of potential partners in online dating sites are drawn using Generic Structure Potential (GSP) analysis. Seven stages are identified in the discourse of online potential partners. They are discourse initiation, introduction, question and response, request, admiration, definition of relationship and topic formation. The generic structure of these elements is presented below:

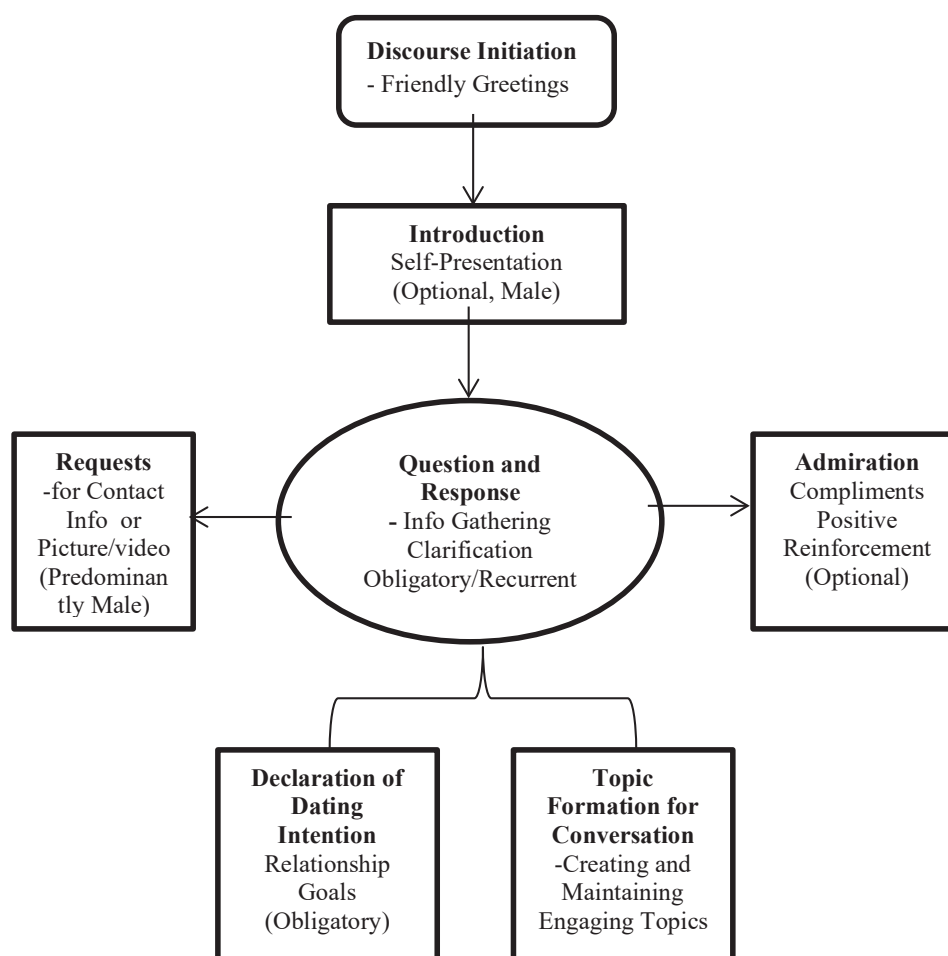
$$[DI] \wedge (INTR) \wedge [QAR \wedge RQ \wedge (AD) \wedge DDI \wedge TF]$$



The above catalogue reveals that there are five obligatory elements and two optional elements in the discourse. The obligatory elements in the discourse of online potential partners are discourse initiation (DI), question and response (QAR), request (RQ), declaration of dating intention (DDI) and topic formation (TF) while the optional elements are introduction (INTR) and admiration (AD). The caret sign (^) shows the sequence of the elements. The elements DI, QAR, RQ, AD, DDI and TF are restrained in terms of positions of occurrence. This implies that DI can only occur at the initial stage of the discourse after which INTR may follow. However, the restraints on QAR, RQ, AD, DDI and TF as a whole signify that the elements can occur at any position but within the constraints. Finally, the arrow shows the iteration of the element.

The framework of the interaction structure is given below:

*Figure 1. Patterns of Interaction by Potential Partners in Online Dating*



#### 4.1. Discourse Initiation (DI)

Before any significant interaction can take place between two people who are initially strangers, there has to be an opening act which extends invitation to chat with the other interlocutor. Discourse initiation in online dating sites covers the opening stage of the discourse. This is characterized by a call for intention to interact with a potential partner. It mostly involves friendly, informal or casual greetings to attract attention of the other interlocutor.

It is important to note that greeting is a crucial aspect of human society. Through greeting, two strangers can start a conversation and simple greetings do give the feeling of being connected with others in some way. Greetings are a means for soon-to-be interlocutors to move from physical co-presence into social co-presence (Pillet-Shore, 2008). This shows greeting plays an essential role in initiating and sustaining a relationship. This initial stage sets the tone for the interaction by creating a welcoming and approachable atmosphere. Friendly greetings serve to break the ice and pave the way for more in-depth conversation, establishing the foundation for subsequent exchanges. The importance of this stage cannot be overstated, as it initiates the social bonding process and lays the groundwork for a potential relationship.

The data revealed that greetings are used by both male and female online potential partners to initiate discourse. ‘Hi’, ‘Hello’, ‘Hey’, ‘Good evening. How are you doing?’ are examples of friendly and informal greetings that are used to initiate conversation and signal interest. Also, some discourse initiators address the interlocutor directly by their names – ‘Good evening, Tayo’, ‘Hi, Temi’ – partly to strike a kind of connection.

Similarly, some greetings are accompanied by endearments such as ‘baby’, ‘beauty’, ‘handsome’, ‘cutie’, ‘sweetie’, ‘pretty’, ‘honey’, and ‘dear’, which reflect the discourse initiator’s attempt to express romantic tinge and to declare attraction with the potential partner in order to receive a welcoming response. Though using endearments for a person one does not know well or has a close personal relationship with could be considered offensive by some people, yet, the data revealed that these endearments are signs of wanting to have a closer relationship with the soon-to-be interlocutor. As revealed in the study, the use of endearments is adopted by male as well as female potential partners.

Each time the two potential partners initiate a chat, even as a continuation of an ongoing conversation, there is often an attempt to greet the other interlocutor to signal interest in starting up a conversation. Once the other person acknowledges the greeting, this is a basic, welcoming sign. Thus, DI occurs at the initial stage of the discourse.

## 4.2. Introduction (INTR)

This is an optional element in online dating discourse and is peculiar to male interlocutors. It is considered optional because some interlocutors do not use this element in the discourse. The introduction is characterized by declarative statements providing personal information, such as names, occupations, and locations, to potential daters in order to strike familiarity and establish a positive impression. Male interlocutors in this category typically introduce themselves and share basic personal information as a way of creating familiarity and making a good impression. In the examples below, the original spelling and punctuation have been retained.

Example 1:

*My name is Joshua  
I am a student of UI  
I am based in Lagos.*

The speaker in the above example attempts to intimate the potential partner with information about himself as seen in ‘My name is Joshua’. He introduces himself in a simple declarative form as a student as he may have perceived that the potential partner is also a student. Indexed by the

phrase 'I am based in Lagos', the introduction here signals a way of presenting oneself to the potential partner so that the other person can do the same.

Example 2:

*Hello pretty. This is John from Port Harcourt. Went through ur profile and it really attracted me. You look so beautiful and wonderfully created, will love to know you better.*

In example 2, the speaker introduces himself and states his intentions to the other interlocutor. Providing information that he already went through her profile communicates his interest to the hearer. The lexical items 'attract' and 'beautiful' are indexical of his interest in the potential partner. These words are to appeal to the emotion of the potential partner so as to give a response to the conversation he has initiated. This implies that an introduction is meant to give a potential partner a good impression about whatever the reason for initiating the chat and to familiarize potential partners with one another. Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs (2006) noted the importance of self-presentation in online dating. By providing personal information such as names, occupation, and location, interlocutors attempt to build a sense of trust and connection. This self-disclosure fosters a sense of authenticity and reliability, which are crucial for establishing a meaningful connection. The act of introducing oneself not only conveys basic information but also signals a willingness to be open and transparent, essential qualities for building trust in a digital context.

### 4.3. Question and Response (QAR)

The GSP catalogue reveals that the question and the response are an obligatory element in the discourse of online potential partners. This element does not have a fixed position as it can occur at any position and recur throughout the whole conversation. The interlocutors in online dating discourse make use of interrogative sentences in their conversations as potential partners have to ask questions about one another and clarify confusion. It is not surprising because at this stage there is more to be known about one another.

Question and Response is an obligatory element as most conversations between the interlocutors, especially at the early stage of the relationship, are in the form of questions and answers. Both male and female interlocutors make use of this element which not only opens up communication but also reveals interlocutors' personalities, interests, values and goals. This study identifies two types of questions, such as wh-questions and polar questions. Wh-questions are questions starting with the 'wh'-words, such as what, when, where, who, whom, whose, why and how, while polar questions are questions that require yes or no answers. We have both instances of wh-questions and polar questions in the online dating discourse. This facilitates information exchange, mutual understanding and uncovering personal details and preferences, thereby opening up communication channels. Below are the examples of the question and response elements from the conversations.

Example 3:

*M: Where are you testing from?*

*F: Ibadan*

*M: Ohh cool. I stay in Ibadan too. Where in Ibadan are you testing from?*

*F: Bodija*

*M: I stay around Ringroad. What do you do?*



*F: I am a student and a fashion enthusiast/designer*

*M: Let me guess, do you school in UI?*

*F: Yes. What gives you the nudge? .....What about you? What do you do in Ibadan?*

Through the question and response style, as seen in the above conversation, information about the location and occupation of the interlocutors has been revealed. The male interlocutor who assumed the lead role was able to make enquiries on the town the lady lives, the specific area as well as what she does. The lady, on the other hand, provides responses and also takes turns in the interrogative conversation. Exchanging roles of the interrogator in the conversation means both are interested in knowing each other. Wh-questions (what and where) are majorly used to elicit information. The responses to the questions give room for more questions which continue to open gaps for communication.

Example 4:

*M: How are you doing?*

*F: Not bad. You?*

*M: Quite well... how has your day been?*

*F: Busy. Market is kinda busy*

*M: You make the market runs?*

*F: Yeah. For business*

*M: Neat.. What's your business?*

*F: Well, I flatter ladies figures*

*M: meaning?*

*F: I make ladies dress*

*M: Oh, lovely.*

In example 4, interrogative functions of the sentences have assisted the interlocutors in familiarizing and negotiating meaning. The interrogative sentence led to the understanding of why the female potential partner had gone to the market and the nature of the business she went to conduct there. Asking questions and making follow-up questions to responses not only show interest but also assist in getting clarification of intentions as seen in understanding the figurative sentence 'flatter ladies figures'.

From the above examples, question and response is an obligatory part of any effective interaction process in dating sites. Without this segment, formality may never be broken and familiarity may not take place. This shows most sentences of interlocutors at the early stage are interrogative in use. It uncovers the demographic information of the interlocutors and allows them to understand each other in the way they want to be seen. This stage not only facilitates communication but also reveals personal interests, values, and goals, essential for determining compatibility (Hancock et al., 2007). Asking and answering questions allows individuals to explore each other's personalities, preferences, and compatibility more deeply. This exchange of information is pivotal in assessing whether both parties share common interests and values, which is critical for the potential success of the relationship.

#### 4.4. Request (RQ)

This is also an obligatory element employed mostly by male potential partners. Here, the request according to the data gathered goes in two ways. First, the request could be for the phone number of the potential partner, and second, the request could be for photos and videos of the potential partner. Out of the thirty conversations examined, 28 requested the phone number with the intention of calling and moving the chat to a different application which could afford a real-time conversation. However, only 8 out of the data corpus requested for pictures and 3 for videos. It means that the request is an obligatory element in online dating discourse. This is characterized by the use of modal verbs to indicate a desire to move the conversation to a more personal platform or to obtain further information (e.g., phone numbers, and photos).

Example 5:

*M: Can we mingle?*

*F: Lets see how it goes*

*M: Can I have ur contact?*

*F: 08163524413*

*M: Whatsapp?*

*F: Yes*

*M: Okay. I will chat u up.*

In the example above, the male interlocutor constructs the request as the one of possibility in his use of modality. The modal verb ‘can’ helps him to construct the request as a permission in which the lady has the choice to accede or deny. Modality is used here not only to express the attitude of the interlocutor towards initiating a romantic relationship with the potential partner (‘can we mingle’) but to request her phone number after receiving an affirmation that both of them can mingle. The request for the phone number then is to enhance the relationship. Having personal contact with the potential partner will allow them to exchange calls and texts outside the dating sites.

Example 6:

*M: Whatsapp?*

*F: What happened to Whatsapp?*

*M: Can we move text to whatsapp?*

*F: Why not?*

*M: 08160683431*

*F: 081...*

Similarly, interlocutors exchanged contacts in example 6, not necessarily to call each other but to change the chatting context. The male interlocutor’s intention of collecting the Whatsapp contact of the potential partner leads to the emergent end of exchanging phone numbers with the potential partner. This is also seen in the example below.

## Example 7:

*M: Pls, can we talk better on phone?*

*F: You are asking for my phone number?*

*M: Yes. So we can talk better*

*F: Sorry, not so comfortable with that*

*M: want to be ur good friend and having ur number will make it easier*

*F: Okay. 081.....*

*M: Is it ur whataspp?*

*F: Yes.*

*M: we talk better there.*

In example 7, the female hesitated in giving the contact but she eventually gave it out on the basis that it will make being good friends easier. The major aim of the request for the phone number is to move or continue the chat on *WhatsApp*. This could be because most dating sites are guided by strict rules and violation could mean losing one's account on the site. Once a person loses their account, they lose access to the friends met on the site. In this case, based on the insecurity of holding on to friends for long on dating sites, potential daters often seek to change the context of chatting to *WhatsApp*, which is spontaneous, less formal and less regimented. Most interlocutors on dating sites prefer to move their conversations to platforms like *WhatsApp* which offer real-time chatting and the ability to easily transfer documents, photos, and videos. This transition often occurs because dating sites can have more restrictions and less immediacy in communication. As a result, dating sites serve as the initial point of contact for meeting potential partners, while *WhatsApp* becomes the platform where these relationships are further developed and maintained. This preference echoes the findings of McLaughlin and Vitak (2012), who emphasized the importance of multi-platform communication in maintaining online relationships. By transitioning to more dynamic communication platforms, users can engage in real-time conversations and share multimedia content, which enhances the interaction's richness and immediacy. This move also suggests a progression in the relationship, indicating a desire for more personal and direct communication.

Also, a request for pictures and video is an element used mostly by male interlocutors. Based on the fact that online potential partners could be distanced from each other and need enough evidence in the mental frame to paint a vivid picture, thus, online potential partners often request pictures. These pictures could be random pictures or a selfie in a specific posture and location.

## Example 8:

*Can you send me few pics. I want to gaze at the beauty even more.*

*(Received two pictures)*

*OMG!!! You are So BEAUTIFUL. Can I get more? I don't mind video.*

## Example 9:

*I will love to see you every minute of the day. Would u send me picture of you every day?*

There is an overt request for pictures in examples 8 and 9. In example 8, the interlocutor felt the need to see more of the "pretty lady" and requested her pictures. After receiving two photos, he admired them, offered compliments, and then requested more. In example 9, requesting pictures is a way for the interlocutor to get closer to the potential partner over time.

#### 4.5. Admiration (AD)

This is an optional element in online dating discourse. It involves passing compliments and positive affirmations on the pictures or the little things interlocutors have heard about the other. According to the data gathered, this is characterized by the use of words and phrases with positive connotations to uplift the other interlocutor or to make the other person feel valued and to establish a positive interaction tone. Communicating compliments aims to show love, appreciation, and respect for the potential partner.

Example 10:

*M: I must say you are really beautiful and kinda inclined to want to know you a little better*

*F: You have got the young lady blushing*

*M: Not my intention though but I am glad to put a smile on your face.*

Example 11:

**Wow! You look amazing! I really love the new outfit. It looks great on you!**

Example 12:

*I am so excited to chat with you. You're an inspiration!*

Example 13:

*Deyosola. Your name is so unique. Let me say it again. And I love the way it sounds. Sounds familiar but not actually familiar.*

Whether these words are genuine or exaggerated, interlocutors attempt to express affectional compliments that could present them as someone who cares and pays attention to the details and who is attracted to the potential partner. In example 10, the interlocutor has passed a compliment on the physical appearance of the potential partner (observed in the profile picture) as beautiful. The interlocutor in example 11 commented on the outfit while the interlocutor in example 13 saw the name as unique. It appears as if each interlocutor seeks a particular thing to compliment the other. Not to sound like mere flattery, the interlocutors focus on a particular aspect which they have seen or observed to pass compliments and admiration. Compliments serve to make the potential partner feel valued and appreciated, fostering a positive interaction dynamic. Expressions of admiration can boost the recipient's self-esteem and create a sense of mutual appreciation, which is conducive to developing a romantic relationship (Derlega et al., 2008). The strategic use of compliments can therefore enhance the emotional connection between the interlocutors.

#### 4.6. Declaration of Dating Intention (DDI)

Declaration of Dating Intention is an obligatory element in online dating discourse. The definition of relationship which is given at some point in the discourse can be described as the focus of the discourse. Many people on dating sites have a major singular intention for using dating apps – finding a potential partner with which one can start a relationship (whether ending to be romantic or platonic) (Zanden, 2021). For this to be achieved, it has to be mutually agreed on by both

interlocutors. Hence, there is always an obligation for both interlocutors to define the nature of the relationship when matched. Interlocutors, especially the male potential partner, want to define the relationship from the start.

Data corpus revealed that interlocutors define their intentions in direct and indirect ways. Direct and indirect questions about relationship status are asked to clarify the intent behind the interaction and define the nature of the potential relationship. This is often initiated by male interlocutors to understand the female's relationship status, intentions or the type of relationship they want to start on the dating site.

Example 14:

*M: Are you in a relationship?*

*F: No*

*M: Can we mingle?*

*F: Lets see how it goes.*

Example 15:

*M: Would love to meet you*

*F: Really!. No Wahala*

*M: I hope you are single so I can shot my shot!?*

*F: Lol. Yes, I am single*

*M: Greatest thing I ever heard today.*

Both examples 14 and 15 are indirect attempts of the interlocutors to express their relationship proposition to the potential partners. Indirectly inquiring about the relationship status in both examples signifies that they have dating intentions. In example 14, the male interlocutor initially made an enquiry on whether the potential partner was already in a relationship. With the negation, he saw that as an opportunity to declare his interest in starting a relationship with her. Understanding that the question 'Can we mingle?' is to ask if it was possible for them to start a relationship, the potential partner took a neutral stand. She was neither affirmative nor negative about it. She would rather wait and see the eventual turnout of things before she makes her final decision. Similarly, the interlocutors in example 15 towed the same part. The male was keen about knowing her status before he popped the question to her. Here, 'Yes, I am single' is taken as an affirmative response which means he stands a good chance to start a relationship with her.

Example 16:

*M: Pls, can we be friends if you don't mind?*

*F: Friends we are*

*M: More than dis....*

*F: I hope so.*

Rather than inquiring about the lady's relationship status, the male interlocutor in example 16 took the step of asking if they could be friends. The meaning of 'friend' is privatized in the male's case to mean a romantic relationship. The lady, who does not share the intended meaning of this concept, has to agree that they are already friends. Then, the male explicates that he wanted them to be more than friends. The meaning of 'more than friends' here seems to be mutually shared.



However, some interlocutors do not ask personal questions about the relationship status of the female. They first ask about the objectives of using the dating app. To them, figuring out the motive would indirectly help in nudging them towards the kind of relationship they would initiate with the person.

Example 17:

*M: So what are you down for?*

*F: Friendship*

*M: You are not into hookups?*

*F: I don't do hookup.*

*M: Okay. Good night.*

Example 18:

*M: What are you looking for on the site?*

*F: Why do people ask this question tho. Why don't we start with what you are looking for?*

*M: Hook ups dey her so before going into deep conversation gats know pplz notion. Me am in for anything I meet I just don't hook up coz it's weird*

*F: Hmm. I see. A lot of guys that go 'I'm not into hookups' are actually looking for free hookups. Disguise like they are looking for friendship*

*M: Its not like that. I just want to be sure.*

In the above examples, the interlocutors attempt to negotiate the motive behind being on the dating app. This is to indirectly express their interest and intentions on the sort of relationship they want. In example 17, the male is frank about his real intentions, which are far from having platonic relationships. This, he showed by asking the lady what she was down for. Interest was not mutual. Here, 'goodnight' was a way for the male interlocutor to opt out of the conversation since the intentions were not mutually shared. The female in example 18 considered this style as offensive. She had obviously been asked that question a number of times by other male chatters. However, the asker explained that he was looking for a friend rather than a sexual partner.

All the above examples are consciously seeking to express dating intentions and set boundaries from the start. Whether for friendship, dating or hookups, the interest is negotiated from the beginning. Some whose intentions do not align quit chatting and those who find intentions mutual simply continue interacting till they move the conversation from the dating site to WhatsApp. The move does not mean coherence of intention between the two interlocutors is achieved, but it means they have already broken the ice and can continue interaction on WhatsApp without any formalities. This element reflects the goals of online dating users as noted by Whitty (2008), who found that clear communication of intentions is vital for successful online dating experiences. By explicitly stating their intentions, individuals can avoid misunderstanding and ensure that both parties are on the same page regarding the relationship's direction.

#### 4.7. Topic Formation for Conversation (TF)

In order to keep the line of communication open, there are often conscious attempts to create the topic by both interlocutors. This is an obligatory element in a successful conversation. This element is used by both interlocutors who want to continue interaction. This is usually done implicitly through jokes, opening up on the day's occurrences and games. It contains statements and

questions about daily activities and interests to sustain the conversation by introducing new topics and keeping the interaction dynamic and engaging. This helps build rapport and deepen the connection between the interlocutors.

Example 19:

*M: How was work today?*

*F: Good. Been training a new lady who'll be working with me so its been pretty busy at work.*

*What about yours?*

*M: Work has been pretty packed for me too. I need to cool off with a movie*

*F: You love movies?*

*M: I do. That's how I cool my head off after hard day's work*

*F: What sort of movie do you like?*

*M: Action movies*

*F: What about it that cools you off?*

*M: Everything I guess! The shooting fighting, running.. you know these things are kinda refreshing for me*

*F: And I don't like them because of the fighting and killing!!*

*M: We should watch one together someday. Maybe find one that isn't highly rated.*

Example 20:

*M: How was your day?*

*F: Stressful. Tuesdays are not my fave this semester. 8hours class, 6 at a stretch, personal errands..*

*M: That's Nigerian education for you. If you could live anywhere else in the world, where would it be?*

*F: Hmmm... Nigeria*

*M: Nigeria? Ain't you tired of the country yet?*

*F: Perhaps. But this is the country I have even known where I can predict the traits of her people*

*M: Funny you. So you mean you can predict Nigerians' traits?*

*F: To a considerable extend*

*M: We are complex individuals, I hope you know. Can you predict my individualities?*

*F: Specifically what should I predict about u?*

*M: You are the predictor. You tell me....*

Both interlocutors in examples 19 and 20 open up about their daily experiences in their conversations. Through the discussion on how they spent their day, the interlocutors create topics that eventually lead to the emergence of new knowledge. This implies that most times, the topic is formed from what is culled from the daily events discussed. This element enables potential partners to express their stances on various propositions in the discourse. They argue and agree on various viewpoints, which allows them to overcome formality, build trust and sustain the attention of each other. This element is essential for sustaining interaction and building a deeper connection, consistent with the findings of Sharabi and Caughlin (2017) on the importance of conversational engagement in online dating. Engaging in meaningful and stimulating conversations helps

maintain interest and keeps the interaction dynamic. This ongoing dialogue allows both parties to explore various aspects of each other's personalities and experiences, thereby deepening their connection and enhancing the potential for a lasting relationship.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has investigated the interaction patterns of potential partners on online dating sites, utilizing Generic Structure Potential (GSP) analysis. The findings reveal seven key stages in the discourse: discourse initiation, introduction, question and response, request, admiration, declaration of dating intention, and topic formation. These stages exhibit both obligatory and optional elements, illustrating a structured yet flexible pattern of communication. Discourse initiation and question and response are crucial for breaking the ice and establishing mutual understanding, while requests often signify a desire to deepen the relationship by moving the conversation to more personal platforms like WhatsApp. Introduction and admiration serve as optional elements that enhance familiarity and express affection. Declaration of dating intention is pivotal in defining the nature of the relationship, whether for friendship or romance, while topic formation ensures the continuity of conversation by creating engaging and relatable discussion points.

Each stage is marked by specific linguistic features and serves unique functions within the communication process. Discourse Initiation (DI) involves friendly greetings and endearments to initiate conversation and signal interest. Introduction (INTR), though optional, often includes declarative statements that provide personal information, establishing familiarity and a good first impression. Question and Response (QAR) utilizes interrogative sentences to facilitate information exchange and mutual understanding, while Request (RQ) involves polite modal verb constructions to move the conversation to more personal platforms or obtain further information, predominantly used by male interlocutors. Admiration (AD), also optional, consists of compliments and positive affirmations to express appreciation and create a positive interaction tone. Declaration of Dating Intention (DDI) features direct and indirect questions about relationship status to clarify the intent behind the interaction and define the nature of the potential relationship. Finally, Topic Formation for Conversation (TF) involves statements and questions about daily activities and interests to sustain the conversation and build rapport. These linguistic elements are essential in constructing the interactional framework within online dating discourse. They provide the means through which potential partners navigate their conversations, express their intentions, and build relationships.

This study provides valuable insights into the linguistic elements and interactional structures characteristic of online dating discourse on platforms like Tinder and Tagged. The findings highlight how participants use greetings, introductions, questions, requests for contact information, admiration, declaration of dating intentions, and topic formation to negotiate and establish potential romantic relationships. The findings of this study align with existing research on online dating interactions. Pillet-Shore's (2008) work on greetings, Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs (2006), Zanden et al. (2019) on self-presentation, and Hancock, Toma, and Ellison (2007), and Larson and Asbury (2018) on information exchange all support the identified stages. Additionally, McLaughlin and Vitak's (2012) insights on multi-platform communication, Derlega et al.'s (2008) findings on admiration, and Sharabi and Caughlin's (2017) emphasis on conversational engagement further validate the structured yet flexible patterns observed in this study.

However, this study could neither cover all the dating sites, nor all the intimate conversations of potential partners. Due to the nature of the intimacy of the data samples, many participants were not interested in releasing their private chats. Those who released theirs did not give the

whole conversations for the periods used and intimate conversations in successful relationships with partners on the dating sites were rarely available. Thus, this study was only able to catalogue interaction patterns of incipient relationships. This implies that there are other research outlets that could still be explored. The relatively small sample size and the challenge of obtaining consent for private conversations may impact the generalizability of the findings.

Despite these limitations, the implications of these findings extend beyond the realm of online dating and offer valuable contributions to the study of professional discourse. Understanding the nuanced ways individuals initiate and sustain conversations can inform best practices in fields such as customer service, counselling, and online education. For instance, the strategies for building rapport and trust observed in online dating can be applied to professional settings where establishing a connection is crucial. Moreover, the emphasis on multi-platform communication reflects the growing importance of digital literacy in professional interactions. By recognizing these patterns, professionals can enhance their communication skills, which may lead to more effective and meaningful interactions in their respective fields. Further studies are needed to determine the pattern of interaction in successful relationships. Also, further studies could be carried out on other dating sites beyond the two popular dating sites in this study. In addition, further investigations could be made by comparing the interaction patterns and negotiation strategies of Nigerian participants and participants of other ethnic and cultural backgrounds on dating sites.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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#### ***About the author***

**Opeyemi E. Olawe** holds a master's degree in English Language from the University of Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. He specializes in sociolinguistics, discourse, and metapragmatics and has published work in these areas in reputable journals. With prior experience teaching English at the primary and secondary school levels, he currently applies his skills as a Data Analyst and Research Assistant at Kayster Global Consult in Ikere-Ekiti, Bouesti. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-1434-1944.

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