MASTER

To touch or not to touch
an explorative study on how human touch interactions are perceived

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Award date:
2016

Link to publication
To touch or not to touch
an explorative study on how human touch interactions are perceived

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science
in Human-Technology Interaction

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Industrial Engineering & Innovation Sciences, TU/e
Keywords: Touch, touch avoidant, qualitative research, thematic analysis, interviews
Abstract

Several positive outcomes of touch can be found in the literature such as reducing stress and pain and communicating emotions. However, touch avoidant individuals may not fully benefit from these advantages by giving and receiving less touch compared to others. Whether touch avoidant individuals would indeed benefit from more social touch and how touch may be increased for this group remains unclear. That is why more insight in how touch avoidant individuals experience, think about, and use social touch in their daily lives is important.

Three rounds of semi-structured interviews with five touch avoiders and three touch accepters were held. After thematic analyses the following themes were found: personal preferences, insecurity, desire of more touch and regulation of touch. The touch avoidant individuals preferred a smaller inner circle in which they accept and give touch compared to the touch accepters. Furthermore, most touch avoiders felt insecure about how and when to initiate touch, whereas touch accepters were more concerned about not exceeding the limits of the other person. However, there were also situations in which other persons expected more touch from the touch avoidant individual than they would prefer. To handle touch situations the touch avoidant individuals made use of several strategies that touch accepters also made use of.

Despite the small group of participants, we made a substantial contribution to the understanding of touch avoidant individuals.
Preface

I feel blessed that I got as much time as I wanted to do this research, without feeling much pressure. The last few days before the deadline were another story, but I think everyone experiences that.

I enjoyed doing the interviews very much; it was very special to get to know strangers and to get an insight in their life and their perspective. Thank you for being so open and willing to share your stories. I also would like to thank my supervisors Antal Haans and Wijnand Ijsselsteijn for their endless enthusiasm and interest in the topic and my research. Meetings with you gave me lots of energy and ideas and it is one of the reasons the topic did not become boring. Furthermore, I would like to thank my friends and family for their support. Especially the help during the pre-test was priceless. I also want to thank my boyfriend for his patience and support.

When reading this report, you may notice that this one is thinner than others. This is not because I had to pay for each word I used or that I felt limited by my RSI constrains, it is just because I love to write (important) things with as less words as possible. Or as Blaise Pascal once wrote: "I'm sorry I wrote you such a long letter; I didn't have time to write a short one".

Hopefully this report will give you new insights and gives you a better understanding of others. Enjoy reading!
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Introduction

Literature shows touch can have multiple positive effects. Touch is not only important for communicating emotions and intimacy, but it also seems to reduce stress, and deep-tissue massages seem to reduce pain (Field, 2010). Unfortunately, not everyone receives enough touch to benefit from these advantages. In some cases the lack of touch is involuntary such as for infants and children who live in understaffed orphanages. It seems that an insufficient amount of touch is one of the causes for the below average cognitive skills that are commonly found in this group of people (Nelson, 2007). This developmental disadvantage seem to last for many years, even after adoption (Beckett et al., 2006).

Luckily, the cases of touch deprivation are rare, although smaller differences in amount of touch between persons are more common. This amount is influenced by different factors such as age, gender, context and culture (Gallace & Spence, 2010). Even within the same context, persons differ in the amount of touch they give and receive. Some individuals avoid physical contact with other people. Those individuals are referred to as touch avoidant, touch sensitive or touch averse. Those persons often receive touch from one person, their ‘safe haven’. This is often a romantic partner (Johansson, 2013). With only one person (or a small group of persons) to rely on for touch and avoiding other contacts, it is possible they do not benefit from all the positive effects touch can give.

Although it still has to be empirically established whether touch avoidant individuals would indeed benefit from more touch, it is interesting to explore how the amount of touch could be increased for this group. Therefore, we have to know what aspect(s) of touch are unfavorable during an interaction, as experienced by a touch avoidant person. One of the aspects could be the physical experience of a touch, although this seems unlikely when considering the touch they receive and ask from their ‘safe haven’. Touch avoidant individuals accept physical touch at least from one person which means they do not avoid all physical touch and it is more likely that social factors play a role. Which factors exactly are holding them back is unknown. Not much is known about the perceptions, views and preferences of touch avoidant individuals at the moment. The only qualitative study in literature is from Johansson (2013). She made a start by giving a better insight into how touch avoidant individuals view and perceive touch.

Studying what aspect(s) touch-avoidant individuals dislike is important, because this opens the road to discovering how the amount of touch can be increased and whether more touch is indeed beneficial for touch avoidant people. To increase the amount of touch, different approaches could be taken such as a psychological approach like training or one that involves technology such as mediated touch. Mediated touch technology enables touch over a distance, and could possibly remove the negatively perceived aspects of a touch interaction by providing touch that is better tailored to touch avoider’s needs and wishes. This can be done for example by giving more control over how and when they are being touched. However, research on such mediated touch technologies and their applications is still in its infancy. To research whether and how mediated touch may offer a solution for touch avoidant individuals, first more insights in how touch avoidant individuals experience, think about, and use social touch in their daily lives is required. Therefore, this research focuses on understanding how a touch interaction is perceived by touch avoiders and touch accepters.
Literature overview
In this chapter background information will be provided about what social touch is, what contextual factors influence the amount of social touch in general, and what is known about touch avoidant individuals.

(Social) touch
Touch has various functions, it can be used to discover and feel the world, it provides information about structures, temperatures and shapes. This is called the discriminative function of touch and is supported by a specific neural circuitry (McGlone, Wessberg, & Olausson, 2014). On the other hand, touch also has a social function. Morrison, Löken, and Olausson (2010) distinguish three different functions of social touch: communicating emotions, forming and maintaining bonds, and affiliate behavior, which is seeking close contact with others. Social touch is supported by a second kind of neural circuitry called C-fiber group nerves (McGlone et al., 2014). The C-tactile afferent pathways respond to slow movements, similar to the speed used to caress. Furthermore, the CT afferents are also temperature tuned (Ackerley et al., 2014). These unmyelinated nerves can be found in the hairy skin of mammals (McGlone, Vallbo, Olausson, Loken, & Wessberg, 2007).

Perceived pleasantness of social touch
Social touch is not always pleasant, it is possible to feel aversion and disgust when being touched in a social way (Ellingsen, Leknes, Løsøth, Wessberg, & Olausson, 2016). For example Ellingsen et al. (2014) showed that human touch was rated as less pleasant when being combined with a frowning face image and more pleasant when accompanied with a smiling face image. Moreover, Gazzola et al. (2012) showed that a caress was evaluated as less pleasant when participants saw film clips of a man instead of a woman initiating the felt touch. This was while the actually caress on the participants leg was always done by the same female confederate who was invisible to the participant. Furthermore, Croy, Drechsler, Hamilton, Hummel, and Olausson (2016) showed that the pleasantness of touch is less when accompanied by a disgusting odor. These results indicate that activation of the CT afferents is not a sufficient condition for a pleasant experience, but that the context in which the touch takes place, may have a moderating role. The moderated perceived pleasantness could influence the amount of touch that takes place. Besides the amount of touch, there are also different areas on a body where depending on how close someone is to you, one is allowed to touch (Suvilehto, Glerean, Dunbar, Hari, & Nummenmaa, 2015). Closer family is allowed to touch larger areas compared to more distant family. Furthermore, a woman may touch a wider area than a man. Strangers were only allowed to touch hands and upper torso in a sample of European and Russian participants (Suvilehto et al., 2015).
Contextual factors
In the literature several factors tend to have an influence on the amount of touch that we use and accept, including culture and gender. For example, Italians tend to initiate touch more frequently than Americans (DiBiase & Gunnoe, 2004). Furthermore, more touches were observed between couples in coffee shops in Puerto Rico than in London in an hour time (Jourard, 1966). There also are differences between men and women. Compared to women, men typically have more problems with same-sex touch, which is often linked to homophobic fear (Derlega, Lewis, Harrison, Winstead, & Costanza, 1989). However, Andersen and Guerrero (2008) suggest that this could be different in Arabic cultures where touch between men is probably more accepted. At the moment it is unclear how culture and gender differences exactly interact.

Touch avoidance
Besides the more general influences, individual differences exist in the amount of touch someone prefers in the same context or situation. Jourard (1966) found large standard deviations between subjects concerning body-accessibility, which is allowing someone to contact your body. This led him to suggest a relation between personality and tactual accessibility. In his subsequent paper with Rubin (Jourard & Rubin, 1968) he found more evidence and they argued that this is not only for receiving touch, but probably also for taking the initiative of touching someone else. This was based on the touching and being-touched scores being almost identical and highly correlated.

Measuring touch avoidance
Andersen and Leibowitz (1978) introduced the first quantitative self-report instrument, the TAM 1 and TAM 2 for same-sex touch and opposite sex touch. Their questions were focused on general statements instead of specific situations. Later more questionnaires were developed, such as the questionnaire from Deethardt and Hines (1984) who included touching romantic partners. The Touch Test (Fromme et al., 1989) asked about how comfortably someone would be in certain situations but has the pitfall of interpreting the feelings of other persons (e.g. How comfortable would your mother be in kissing you at a party?). The Seven Touch Scales (Brennan, Kelly, Shey, & Loev, 1997) is only partly dedicated to touch aversion. The social touch questionnaire (Wilhelm, Kochar, Roth, & Gross, 2001) is not limited to touch between partners and includes both initiating and receiving touch. Ozolins and Sandberg (2009)’s questionnaire is focused mainly on touching partner and close relatives. Webb and Peck (2015) developed a concise questionnaire including initiating and receiving touch, but with no attention to who the other person is. Despite the varying quality of the questionnaires, these studies mainly focus on quantitative measuring touch avoidance. The only qualitative study up to now is from Johansson (2013). She found five different themes that will be discussed below.

Skill
During the interviews of Johansson (2013), touch avoidant individuals said that touch does not come natural to them. They talked about not knowing how to touch practically, and not knowing when and what kind of touch to give to whom. They also thought that it is difficult to interpret other person’s signals, and had the fear of being misunderstood and perceived as too intimate. A tactic to deal with this uncertainty is waiting for the other person to take the initiative.
Fear
Touch avoidant individuals are afraid of the touch situation itself and about how others will judge their touch skills. They are afraid of not having control and some of them mentioned fear of intimacy, that they feel exposed and weak.

Physical appearance
Touch avoidant individuals are concerned and anxious about their physical body and experiences of touch with other people. The feeling of not knowing the physical limits of their body and of being physically clumsy. Some also emphasized the importance of being clothed and they were concerned about their body odor.

Safe haven
However, touch avoiders can see touch as a safe haven for comfort and support, they associate touch with the promise of love. They accept touch from a romantic partner or parent. It is important for touch avoidant respondents that the romantic partner is the one who touches, initiates, and responds to touch. It is more a one way communication channel because they use the romantic partner as a safe haven and they were not talking about providing a safe haven for their partner.

Ambivalence
This theme expresses that the touch avoidance group did not want to touch or be touched, although they seem to have a desire to be more open to skin-to-skin contact. They both have feelings of aversion to touch and a desire for a more relaxed relationship to touch. Some participants did not want to have more touch, but they wished to feel more relaxed about physical closeness.

Research aim
This study aims to provide a better insight into how touch avoiding individuals experience, think about, and use social touch in their daily lives. Our focus is on social touch interactions with many different persons. In contrast to Johansson (2013) no specific attention is given to touch with a romantic partner and to medical situations. We tried to acquire thorough understanding by having three rounds of interviews. Besides giving the participants the opportunity to get used to the interview setting and the type of questions, we were also able to ask questions based on insights gained from previous sessions, ask clarification about responses from earlier sessions that were unclear and ask questions to verify or falsify insights gained from the in-between thematic analyses. Our sample consisted of Dutch students who scored either high or low on the touch avoidance scale (Wilhelm et al., 2001). In comparison to the sample of Johansson (2013), our participants were a few years younger and were selected with a questionnaire less focused on partner touch. However, it is still interesting to see the similarities and differences between the current study and Johansson (2013). Our results can be used to verify and complement her results. With a different approach, namely an iterative research, we hope to contribute to a better understanding of touch avoiding individuals.
Method

Design
This research is an explorative, qualitative research based on answers given in three semi-structured interviews each followed by thematic analysis of the interviews. The scope and content of the first session was defined at the start of the experiment. The scope and content of the second and third session, in contrast, was developed during the course of the experiment based on responses of participants during previous session(s) and insights acquired by the thematic analyses conducted in-between the sessions. Therefore, this research took an iterative, analytic approach, which made it possible to develop new questions after the first and second session to obtain a deeper understanding of the topic.

Participants
Participants were recruited in various ways via the J.F. Schouten database, flyers and Facebook. This resulted in a group of 74 persons who filled in an online Dutch version of the social touch questionnaire (Wilhelm et al., 2001). The scores of the 74 persons were $M_{STQ}=34.1$ and $SD_{STQ}=10.8^1$. Only Dutch speaking participants were considered to minimize the influence of cultural aspects. As the researcher is Dutch herself, this made it easier to interpret the behavior and conventions of participants. The social touch questionnaire was used as a selection criterion for the main experiment. Persons younger than 26 years (for practical reasons), who left behind their contact details and with either a low ($<23$) or high ($>41$) score, were invited to participate in the main study to gather different views on touch. A total of eight persons responded and were interviewed (five man, three women). All were Dutch students between 18 and 24 years old ($M_{Age}=19.4$; $SD_{Age}=1.9$). Five of the participants scored high on the touch avoidant scale ($M_{STQ}=48$; $SD_{STQ}=3.3$). The other three scored low ($M_{STQ}=17.3$; $SD_{STQ}=3.7$) which implies more touch seeking behavior. After participation the eight participants received €22.50 each.

Apparatus & Materials
The study had a pre-selection and thereafter three different interview rounds. The audio of the interviews was recorded with the help of a laptop and the audio program Audacity. During the study the following materials were used.

Touch avoidance scale
The social touch questionnaire (Wilhelm et al., 2001) was chosen as selection tool because it gives a good idea of a person’s touch avoidance tendencies in different situations. In contrast to other questionnaires the focus is not limited to touch between partners (Deethardt & Hines, 1984; Ozolins & Sandberg, 2009). Furthermore, both initiating touch and receiving touch are included. The questionnaire was translated into Dutch by the researcher using back and forth translation. The scale ranged from zero to eighty, with a high score implying more touch avoiding behavior.

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1 STQ = Social Touch Questionnaire of Wilhelm et al. (2001)
**Relation Map**
Participants were asked to make a relation map of people around them and indicate what kind of touch is common between the individuals or groups they indicated. This was done on a sheet of A3 paper with pen and pencils. This map was used as a tool to guide the remaining questions. An example of such a map can be found in Appendix A.

**Autism spectrum measure**
This study is conducted in Eindhoven, which is known as a region with a relative high percentage of people with autism spectrum conditions (Roelfsema et al., 2012). Furthermore, people with autistic traits have a diminished neural response to affective touch (Voos, Pelphrey, & Kaiser, 2013). Therefore, there might be a relation between autism and touch avoidance. That’s why in the current study the Dutch version of the 28-item AQ-Short (Hoekstra et al., 2011) was used. Due to not being the main focus of the research and to time constraints, the abridged version was chosen. The suggested cut-off point for having autistic traits (>65) was not reached by any of the current participants (scores M=48.5; SD=3.9).

**Procedure**
The participants were asked to come to the UseLab on the Eindhoven University of Technology in the Netherlands. This lab has the appearance of a living room and is equipped with comfortable sofas and a dining table with chairs. This location was chosen to make the participants feel at ease. After arrival, the participant was informed about the goal and the procedure of the experiment and was asked to sign an informed consent form. Then the audio recording was started and the researcher introduced herself to the participant. Next, she asked the participant to introduce him or herself as well. The interview continued with general questions about touch. An interview guide was used (see Appendix B for an overview of the topics). Also, the participant was asked to complete the autism spectrum questionnaire in the first session. After the first session, the audio was transcribed and analyzed. This was done in Dutch, the same language as the interviews.

After at least two weeks, but within four-and-a-half weeks the next session with the same participant was scheduled. During the second session the questions were more focused on people around the participant and what kind of touch is common in their relationship. To guide the participant and make situations more concrete, the participants were asked to draw a relation map of the people around them. Furthermore, several questions were asked to get more clarification on previous statements of the participants. Again audio files were transcribed immediately after the session and analyzed using thematic analyses. During the third session more in-depth questions were asked based on insights gained from previous sessions. Clarification were asked about responses from earlier sessions that were unclear and questions were asked to verify or falsify insights gained from the in-between thematic analyses. After the third session the participant were paid. The interviews took between twenty-five and fifty-five minutes each. All the sessions were scheduled in the beginning of 2016 and were all conducted by one and the same interviewer.
Analysis
The thematic analysis is based on the different phases described by Braun and Clark (2006). The transcripts of the first session were summarized using codes that were developed based on issues raised by the participants themselves (inductive). The codes were compared between the different interviews and narrowed down to comprehensive codes by rereading the transcripts. During reading and coding of the eight interviews of the first session, some ambiguities and unclear statements were found. These were used as a basis for several questions of the second session. After conducting the interviews of the second session, transcripts were made, read and coded. Based on the transcripts and codes the first themes and the corresponding schemes were developed. These were tested and adapted by rereading the transcripts. Meanwhile, the questions of the third session were developed based on given statements of participants and the themes so far developed. After the third session the transcripts were made and read several times. Again the different stages were conducted once more on the transcripts from the third session. Across the three sessions, the focus thus shifted from the more bottom-up approach of the first session to a more top-down analyses to check if the themes extracted were coherent with the codes and transcribed data.
Results

Four different themes were identified. Each theme coincides with a section: Personal preferences; Insecurity; Desire of more touch; Negotiation strategies. Each section contains several statements which are supported by translated quotes. These quotes are accompanied by a code which gives more information about the characteristics of the participant who made the quote, for example [Accepter A, Female, 0.0.0]. The first part of the code signals whether the interviewee was a touch avoider or a touch accepter. The second part is a unique identification letter for each participant. The third part gives information about the gender. The final part is the unique identification number of the quote. When the researcher asked a question, this is marked with [R]. The original Dutch quotes used in this chapter can be found in Appendix C.

Personal preferences

Participants differ in who may have what kind of touch. Most of the touch avoidant individuals mentioned that touch is reserved for a smaller group of people compared to touch accepters. We think both groups consider touch as special and intimate, though touch avoiders express this explicitly and see it as a problem.

One of the touch avoiders said that if touch was less personal it would make it easier to use for people he knows less well.

[R]: Would it be easier for you when there is something in between [as with mediated touch]?
[Avoider Y, Male, 1.2.1]: Maybe to the contrary, because then it would be a bit less personal. I touch because it is so very personal. On the other hand, it would make it easier to do with persons I know a bit less, because then it is not that personal.

One of the participants was wondering if a hug with his girlfriend would lose its value if he would hug more people.

[Avoider V, Male, 3.5.2]: My younger sister is a very cuddly type. So she normally does cuddle often. I often have the feeling of, I call it always a bit fake. But that is the way I see it. Because she is so over enthusiastic with everyone. Then I’m wondering, if you really have an emotional connection with someone, is it then still special to hug that person... I don’t cuddle often, so when I cuddle my girlfriend, then I experience that as nice. However, when I would cuddle all day, I’m wondering if it still has the same value.

Another touch avoidant participant mentioned that he does not want everyone to trigger his emotions, it seems that he would like to stay in control.

[R]: Is that [associating touch with people you know well] because it is intimate for example?
[Avoider Y, Male, 1.2.3]: Yes, it immediately is emotional loaded, I do not want just anyone, not everyone may release that.

Another participant mentioned that his personal space is important to him. He also mentioned that he would rather solve his own problems then that someone would come to hug him.

[Avoider X, Male, 3.3.4]: It does not feel comfortable when others get too close when it is not necessary. I prefer my own space around me, no one else should enter, then it is all right.
[R]: If you for example would be sad, would you prefer to receive a touch?
[Avoider X, Male, 3.1.5]: No rather not. [...] I rather solve it by myself instead of someone to come to give me a hug.

Furthermore, one of the participants remarked that he notices textures very well, for example the texture of a cup that the interviewer had not paid attention to. It seems that he is sensitive to touch.

[Avoider Y, Male, 3.2.6]: I just noticed how things feel. [...] When I pick it up, I already notice that here [on the plastic cup] are ridges or on clothes and all that kind of stuff, that is something I’m aware of all the time, aware of that it has a different texture.

Furthermore, he mentioned that he is also conscious about social touch.

[R]: Last time you said that sometimes you feel stiff, is that with all kinds of touches?
[Avoider Y, Male, 3.2.7]: Yes it is just, it is kind of, my muscles are a bit stiffer and I think that it is with everyone actually, it is not that I don’t have it when my parents touch me because they are closer to me, it is just always, I don’t know exactly what. Maybe because I’m so aware of touches that touch mean relatively much to me, it’s just hard to feel comfortable when it happens set. But maybe if it would take longer, it could be more comfortable because those are relative short touches but if you’re just sitting together cozy on the couch than on a certain moment it would be more relaxed.

This part of the chapter showed that the touch avoidant persons do not want to have as much touch as touch accepters. They seem to position their dividing line between people they would and would not like to interact with touch differently. Different reasons were found from believing that touch is restricted to a small group of people to staying in control of their own emotions. Also personal space and sensitive to touch were found.
Insecurity
Some of the people with touch avoidance feel insecure in situations involving touch. They are uncertain about how to initiate touch because some feel insecure about estimating what is being expected of them or about how to move exactly. They may even be afraid of not doing it right and leaving a bad impression on others, including bystanders. This insecurity is also found with touch accepters although the scope differs. The touch accepters are concerned about not exceeding the limits of someone else.

One of the touch avoidant participants explains that it is important to leave a good impression on persons she knows less compared to people she knows better such as her parents and boyfriend.

[Avoider W, Female, 3.4.8]: Yes, if a mistake with touch is made [with my parents or boyfriend], it actually does not happen, but it would not be that worse, because you feel at ease with each other. With that other [greeting the friends of my boyfriend] then you would like to leave a certain impression. And not a stupid impression of, I did something weird or so, that’s not what you want. That’s not how you want to be remembered.

[R]: With people you know you mean or?

[Avoider W, Female, 3.4.9]: Yes and also because you know that you, actually you don’t know exactly what you can expect, but if they do something different than you expected, then it does not feel immediately uncomfortable or something. Then you can immediately, you can laugh about it or something and then... [...] And it is not “shit what I’m I doing now.”. So it is different.

It is not only about the impression you leave on the person that you touch, but also about the impression bystanders may form towards you.

[Avoider W, Female, 3.4.10]: Because if I were for example in a circle and someone next to me is telling something, then I can feel being watched when I actually want to touch someone but then. Maybe it’s just insecurity than. [...] And also because the threshold is higher for me to touch compared to others I think, yes then I’m even more aware of and especially if the attention of everyone is also drawn towards it than, then I would be more likely not to touch someone then if I would have been alone with that person.

Furthermore, to let a touch interaction go well, there is some kind of insight needed about what the other person is expecting. Some participants find it difficult to discover and to estimate the situation.

[Avoider W, Female 3.4.11]: Sometimes I think it is difficult to know which touch is appropriate. Because for example with the friends of my boyfriend, they give each other in different ways, in different ways they say hello. [...] I think that is really annoying, because then I don’t know what I can expect. And most of the time they first say hello to my boyfriend, and then I can see how they do it and then I’m thinking of what is going to happen, so that is always uncomfortable I think. Yes I do not see them often, with the people that I see more often it is okay but.

[R]: so you notice something is going to come, there will be an greeting, only you don’t know in which manner..

[Avoider W, Female, 3.4.12]: Yes, I firstly don’t know in which way and when I see how they, how my boyfriend does it, that does not mean that they do the same thing with me kind of. So it is always very frustrating.
The following touch accepter is also insecure but this is about not knowing how far she can go.

[Accepter T, Female, 3.7.13]: That’s something I don’t know actually, it’s maybe more that I maybe feel more insecure about it, that I think what would the other person think about me. It is not that I definitely have to touch someone so I think that if someone does it first with me, I know what the person likes and how far you could go. Then you can do it back but I think that’s a bit about waiting what the other person thinks and if you don’t know that beforehand.

Not all touch avoiding individuals find it hard to estimate the situation. The following touch avoidant participant referred to estimating the situation as he can just sense what would be expected.

[Avoider V, Male, 3.5.14]: When do you give a hand and when not, that is something you feel I think.

[Avoider V, Male, 3.5.15]: I already have a girlfriend for five years, but a lot of times you see that friends try to hit on a girl. And you see very quickly “stop with it because it doesn’t work”. Then you see it can come from both sides. Then the girl doesn’t like it or he doesn’t like certain movements and it is not necessarily very extreme, it can already be a hand on the shoulder or something. I can imagine that when you’re in the product and hand over my shoulder would not something be that I would enjoy.

Besides estimating the situation, it is also possible to feel not fluent with the movements needed to touch.

[R]: Is that because, feeling uncomfortable so to say, because the other person is coming so close or because you have to, with your body have to do it?

[Avoider X, Male, 3.3.16]: The second part mostly because then I have to hug back, and it is not comfortable that he comes close, but I think mostly the second that I also have to move back and hold.

[R]: Do you feel skilled in giving hugs?

[Avoider X, Male, 3.3.17]: No, but I don’t do it that often so.

This section showed that some of the touch avoidant persons experience insecurity. They worry about what others will think of them. It includes being insecure about rightly estimating the situation and moving in the right way. This prevents them in feeling free to use touch in their interactions. Furthermore, the touch accepters also experience a sort of insecurity although this is more about not exceeding someone’s limits.
Desire of more touch
This section focuses on what kind of challenges exist when preferring less touch compared to others. Other persons, for example, may expect more touch from a person than he or she would prefer to give. Sometimes the response is to use or tolerate touch because touch avoidant individuals feel obligated or do not want to hurt the feelings of someone else. On the other hand, some of them want to use more touch in certain situations, but feel a barrier to actually do it.

More touch expected by others
Some of the participants experience that others expect more touch from them.

[Avoider X, Male, 3.3.18]: It [the bro-hug or bro-shake\(^2\)] doesn’t feel comfortable indeed. You’re doing it because you have to, but I don’t feel comfortable with it. It is just, it’s part of it so it’s not a big problem but I’m not completely comfortable with it.

[Avoider X, Male, 3.3.19]: When I’ve been on holidays for a month and I come back, then my mom wants to have a hug, I can’t avoid it, but if it were up to me then I would just walk closer and say hey how you doing.

[R]: Do you express it if you don’t want something for example?
[Avoider X, Male, 3.3.20]: No, most of the time I just allow it.
[R]: Okay your tolerating it kind of?
[Avoider X, Male, 3.3.21]: Yes I tolerate it and then it’s over within two seconds. It’s not, I’m not going to fight about, about nothing so to say, unless someone would give a hand for example and holds it’s for five seconds, then you have, then you try to untie his hand, but.

[Avoider X, Male, 3.3.22]: Most the time I have the feeling that it has to be done, the touches. But now and then when I have the choice, those moments exists, for example with thanking someone. If I would have the choice then I think I wouldn’t do it. Unless that person is signaling that he’s ready for it. Than I have the feeling that it has to be done. But if they are not ready for it then the feeling of it has to be done is also disappearing, because he is not ready for it, so he has the feeling that it does not have to happen. Otherwise he would be more open for it.

[Avoider W, Female, 3.4.23]: Yes for example one of my teammates chooses to give hugs quite fast. And then it is easier to do it myself when I would like to give her a hug because compared to someone I have never hugged before or received a hug from, to do it.
[R]: Okay because then you know how it feels, or because?
[Avoider W, Female, 3.4.24]: Then I know it is okay to do it, and because I know kind of that that person likes it. Because for me it’s not necessary but because I know that that person likes it, then I would sooner give her a hug, instead of just saying what you are going to say.

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\(^2\) A Bro-hug or bro-shake is a somewhat different type of hug. In contrast to a conventional hug where you embrace each other, in the bro-shake right hands grab each other’s thumbs. During a bro-hug also upper bodies come closer to each other.
More touch wanted by touch avoider

Sometimes some of the touch avoidant participants want to touch someone else, but feel a kind of barrier. They first have to take a big step mentally before actually doing it. This hesitation was not found by touch accepters. Sometimes it is possible for the touch accepters to give more touch but they take the wishes of the other person into account.

[R]: Do you feel the need to touch someone?
[Avoider Y, Male, 3.2.25]: Yes sometimes I do, although I think it’s hard to actually do it. It is just a high barrier that I have to mentally challenge before I can give someone a hug or a hand, not really a hand but a hug definitely.

Especially, moments in which someone needs comfort, touch avoidant individuals hesitate with using touch.

[R]: if I understand correctly, if you were able to change anything than you would like to take the initiative more often.
[Avoider Y, Male, 1.2.26]: Yes.

[R]: Are there any moments when you’re thinking now I would actually want to do it?
[Avoider Y, Male, 1.2.27]: I do have often with people that are close and when they are in a negative mood, when they have a stupid day, that I think it’s really hard for me to kind of comfort them, that’s something that I can’t do very well. Actually during that kind of moments I would like to do it.

[R]: Would you use a touch to comfort someone? Or would you take a different approach?
[Avoider X, Male, 3.3.28]: I would do it, but I think it would feel uncomfortable. It is possible that the whole situation is a bit uncomfortable because someone is sad than it is already a bit like oo. In the end I would do it but it would take a while before I make the first move. I have already experienced it a few times that someone is sitting this way [sad posture], when you’re sitting next to someone for half an hour than the first few minutes you ... yes, no, yes, no ... and after a while you give a tap on the shoulder because then it is over.

This section showed that in some situations others expect more touch of touch avoidant persons. In other cases touch avoidant individuals would like to initiate more touch, but felt barriers to actually initiate it. This is in contrast to touch accepters who did not mention any barriers.
Negotiation Strategies

During a social touch interaction there are (at least) two persons with their own preferences that not necessarily have to match. Both persons have their own preferences and there seem to be a kind of negotiation phase in which participants are trying to discover what the other person wants and communicating if and what kind of touch should take place. Due to differences in preference there is a basis what can lead to a conflict. The different participants came with several strategies how to estimate and to cope with the situation.

Sometimes it is hard to estimate what the norm of the other person is. Therefore, different strategies were mentioned. One of the strategies mentioned is to gather more information. This can be done for example by observing what other persons are doing and trying to infer what the norm is. Based on more information another strategy can be chosen.

[R]: *Then you would rather follow, to queue and watch what the others do?*
[Accepter T, Female, 3.7.29]: *Yes, exactly that. Sometimes I think it is also difficult, do I have to give someone three kisses or not, then I think I will first observe others.*

Another strategy to reduce the uncertainty is asking verbally if the other wants a hug or rather have a hand. Although this was only used with hugs because with more formal touches people assume that you know what to do, and the question is a bit awkward.

[R]: *Are you the one who takes the initiative the most with touches?*
[Accepter Z, Female, 1.1.30]: *I have quite cuddly friends, it depends. Most of the time I propose verbally “Do you want a hug or a hand” so to speak. That is if I’m not sure. I propose, so most of the time it comes from me.*

It is also possible to do nothing unless the other person does, so responding to the other person. This can be done in two ways, with an open posture what touch accepters more often choose or with body language that signals that you not prefer to touch.

[Accepter T, Female, 3.7.31]: *Yes, because from some people you don’t know how touchy they are ... and sometimes you really can see or know whether a person is [touchy]. But sometimes you don’t know that and I like to know it before I come closer.*

[Avoider W, Female, 3.4.32]: *Yes. The threshold is higher for myself to touch other people, I think. And sometimes I notice about myself that I unconsciously raise the threshold for people I don’t want to be touched by. But for people whom I like and who are closer to me, those people would touch me sooner than I would touch them.*

When the preferences match there is no problem, however when those preferences are not the same, at least one of the persons have to find a strategy to solve this discrepancy. This can be a conflict avoiding strategy by giving in and adapting to the other person. This can be by touching more than you prefer when your standard is lower than the other person.
[R]: Okay, imagine you are on a party in a student house and someone introduces their self, he says its name and then gives a hug. What would you think about it?

[Avoider X, Male, 3.3.33]: Than I would just stand there. Then he would give his hug and I would be standing with a bit like why? Bit like ...

[R]: You’re standing still and you’re not really hugging back? It’s more like ...

[Avoider X, Male, 3.3.34]: Okay, the first half second I won’t hug back because then you think like Why? And then you hug back because otherwise it would be so mean for the other person that he would think something like oo [negatively surprised].

[Avoider X, Male, 3.3.35]: With [people I can’t stand] I actually don’t want a touch from. It is acceptable, but it is not ...

When your standard is higher you can be more concerned about not exceeding the limits of the other. Therefore, you can touch less than you would do with others from the same level, but taking in to account the preferences of the current person. One of the touch avoidant participants said that most others were aware that he was not preferring much touch and that it worked fine.

[R]: Yes, let me see. Do you sometimes have the feeling that people want to touch you but that you don’t want that?

[M, Avoider V, 3.5.36]: Mmmm, no. No, I think that most people I mix with seem to know when I do and do not like it. Maybe sometimes when I’m not in the mood and I don’t like anything that my little sister nudges me and that I think […] Just walk by. It’s fine. But it’s not the case that someone touches me in a way I don’t like. That is not the case.

Other strategies which potentially can lead to more conflict are not giving in, but defending one’s own preferences. This can be communicated with body language, rolling your shoulder away, by doing a step back or turning away. It is also possible to verbally say that you do not want it. This kind of strategies were also used by touch accepting individuals when they did not want to be touched at a certain moment or by a specific individual.

[R]: Because how would you, it’s not about close friends or something, but how would you communicate that you don’t want a touch?

[Accepter T, Female, 3.7.37]: Yes, in the city you get touched by other people and then I can turn around angry like Go away! And sometimes my boyfriend comes sitting very close to me and then I think Don’t do that! But then I just say that to him. In case of other situations I don’t turn away what I can think of. But it is indeed if someone puts an arm around you and I think that is not necessary now, then I just put it off...

This section showed different strategies to handle touch situations. A first strategy is gathering more information by observing or asking what the other person wants. Another strategy is doing nothing and let the initiative at the other person. A third strategy is estimating that a touch was desired and thereby giving in and adapting to the other person. A final strategy is communicating that a touch is not desired with the help of (body) language.
Discussion

Several positive outcomes of touch, such as reducing stress and pain, and communicating emotions can be found in the literature. However, there are persons who are avoiding touch interactions and it is possible that they do not fully benefit from the positive outcomes of touch. It would be interesting to see if this group of people could benefit from more touch, for example with the help of mediated touch, which is enabling touch on a distance. Before implementing mediated touch and providing design considerations it is necessary to get more insight in touch avoiding individuals and how they perceive, use and think about social touch. Therefore, this study interviewed five touch avoidant and three touch accepting individuals to get an understanding of how they experience touch.

We found that the touch avoidant individuals seem to prefer a smaller inner circle in which they accept and give touch compared to touch accepters. Several reasons were given by touch avoiders. Some argued that touch is special, intimate and may lose its value when shared with more people. Others indicated that they did not want other people to trigger their emotions, or that they highly valued their personal space. Furthermore, most touch avoiders felt insecure about how and when to initiate touch. Some of the touch avoiders did not feel confident in their movements and estimation of the situation and were afraid of doing it wrong. They were worried about leaving a bad impression to the other person and bystanders. Touch accepters were sometimes also insecure, but they were more concerned about not exceeding the limits of the other person. Moreover, touch avoiders experienced situations in which they wanted to initiate more touch, but felt barriers to actually initiate. On the other hand, there are also situations in which others expected more touch from the touch avoidant individual, than they would prefer to give. In such case they often felt obligated to receive or give more touch than they would prefer because they did not want to hurt the other person’s feelings, did not want to create fuss about it or because they felt that it was common to do so in that particular situation. It should be noted, however, that this was also true for touch accepters. These individuals also encounter situations in which they did not prefer to touch, but initiated it or let it happen because they did not want to hurt someone’s feelings. To handle several touch situations participants made use of several strategies varying from doing nothing, gathering more information, giving in to the other person, and communicating that touch is not desired.

The results of the current study are in line with the study of Johansson (2013) and complemented her findings in various ways. Our theme of Personal differences gives a richer description of what is behind being touch avoidant. The themes Insecurity and Desire of more touch were also found by Johansson, although they were labeled differently. The theme Negotiation strategies was not addressed by Johansson. With her theme ambivalence she already tapped into the wish of touch avoidant individuals of touching more. In our view, however, there should be given more attention to the context of a touch interaction in follow up research. This context is for example the person who does it, the accompanied reason and bystanders.

Furthermore, whereas Johansson (2013) found that touch as a safe haven is mainly coming from the romantic partner, we are wondering if this could also be more than one person and even be a (small) group. It is possible that being touch avoidant is a sliding scale and that this is associated with the amount of persons the participant enjoys giving and receiving touch with.
There were several noteworthy limitations to the present research. First, it might be that our sample of participants did not include the more severe cases of touch avoidance. They may not have considered participating in research on social touch. The interviewed group was quite small and it is possible that the total amount of views is not saturated. This means that there could be views that are not captured by this research, more research is needed to complete the picture. Furthermore, we had three round of interviews for gaining a thorough understanding, however, it is still hard to explain cause and effect. For example participants mentioned that they wanted to be more relaxed with taking the initiative of giving touch. We are wondering whether the reason could be to have less conflict or that they indeed want to increase their amount of touch, but they do not know how to do it because they are too uncertain about the situation. It was also notable that one of the participants scored quite high on the touch avoidance scale, however during the interviews he seemed to be satisfied with how things were in his life. It is possible that he is indeed satisfied with how things are going or that people around him are taking his whishes into account. He did not tell much about his own views but more about what people are thinking in general.

There are still many things that could be explored concerning touch avoidant individuals. In relation to mediated touch, it might be that touch avoidant individuals experience larger differences between touch and mediated touch compared to other persons. This is to be expected because touch avoiders see touch as more intimate and personal. More research is needed to see if this is indeed the case. Furthermore, after doing the interviews and reviewing our results, we noticed differences among the participants who were all labeled as touch avoidant. This made us wonder whether the definition of being touch avoidant is well enough defined yet. The question is whether being touch avoidant is based on behavior, attitude or about experiencing problems in social interactions, or a combination. Is someone touch avoidant if they feel skilled, but their preference is to have touch interactions with a small group of people? Is someone touch avoidant if they do not feel skilled, but do appreciate receiving touch from more persons than their romantic partner? Is someone touch avoidant if their attitude is avoiding touch but in their behavior they do not avoid touch? In our opinion someone should be classified as touch avoidant when their attitude is about having less touch. We argue this way because becoming more skilled and use touch in one’s behavior seem to be things that can be learned. The question remains whether a touch avoidant attitude is more like a personal trait or based on skills.

Despite the limitations of this research and the many open ends in the research area, the results found are a substantial addition to the knowledge about touch avoidant individuals and their social interactions. We hope we inspire others and invite them to dive into this interesting research topic.
References


Appendix A – Relation map example

Below a relation map of a participant is shown. This one was chosen because the participant gave permission, it is written in English, and the participant did not use any names, which ensured the privacy of the people involved.
Appendix B – Interview subjects

Session 1
- Explanation of the goal of the research and procedure
- Introducing the interviewer and the interviewee
- Questions about:
  - Frequencies and context of touches
  - Satisfaction concerning touches
  - Unpleasant touches

Session 2
- Questions about
  - Classification of persons and touches
  - Ways to use touch
  - Estimating the other
  - Communicating boundaries
  - Needs
  - Mistakes and conflicts

Session 3
- Questions about:
  - Presence of others
  - Ideal amount of touch
  - Skills
  - Opinion touch
Appendix C – Dutch quotes
The quotes are in the same order as in the results section.

Personal Preferences

[R]: Zou het makkelijker voor je zijn als er [bij mediated touch] iets tussen zit?
[Avoider Y, Male, 1.2.1]: Misschien ook juist niet, omdat het toch iets wat minder persoonlijk is. Ik doe een aanraking omdat het juist zo heel persoonlijk is. Aan de andere kant zou het dan wel anders met mensen die ik toch net iets minder ken, dan juist wel weer makkelijker zijn omdat dat dan toch weer niet zo persoonlijk is.

[Avoider V, Male, 3.5.2]: Mijn zusje dan is een heel erg knuffelig type. Dus die knuffelt normaal wel vaak. Ik heb dan altijd een beetje het idee van, ik noem dat altijd een beetje nep. Maar dat is de manier hoe ik het zie zeg maar. Omdat ze zó overenthousiast is bij iedereen. Dan vraag ik me af, als je echt een emotionele band met iemand hebt, of het dan nog wel zo speciaal is om diegene op een manier te knuffelen. Ik knuffel niet zo vaak. Dus als ik bij m'n vriendin knuffel, dan ervaar ik dat als fijn. Terwijl als ik heel de dag zou knuffelen, dan vraag ik me af of dat nog dezelfde waarde heeft.

[R]: Is dat [aanrakingen associëren met mensen die je goed kent] omdat het intiem is bijvoorbeeld?
[Avoider Y, Male, 1.2.3]: Ja, het heeft wel gelijk een emotionele lading, dat wil ik niet zomaar aan iedereen, niet iedereen mag dat losmaken.

[Avoider X, Male, 3.3.4]: Ik, het voelt niet fijn als anderen te dichtbij komen als het niet per se hoeft zeg maar. Dan, ik heb liever mijn eigen ruimte om mij heen, dan hier moet gewoon niemand in komen, dan is het goed.

[R]: Want als je bijvoorbeeld verdrietig zou zijn? Zou je dan wel een aanraking willen hebben?
[Avoider X, Male, 3.1.5]: Nee, liever niet. […] Ik los het dan liever zelf op dan dat iemand een knuffel komt geven.

[Avoider Y, Male, 3.2.6]: Ik merk het gewoon op hoe dingen voelen. […] Als ik het beet pak dan heb ik al heel erg door dat hier [op de plastic beker] ribbelten op zitten of hier op kleding en al dat soort dingen, dat is gewoon iets waar ik me constant mee bewust, bewust van ben als iets een andere structuur heeft.

[R]: Wat je had het de vorige keer over dat je soms houterig voelt, is dat bij alle soorten aanrakingen?
[Avoider Y, Male, 3.2.7]: Ja dat is gewoon, dat is wel enigszins, mijn spieren wat stijver zijn en zo ik denk wel dat dat het en ook met iedereen eigenlijk wel, het is niet dat ik dan niet heb als mijn ouders het doen omdat die dichter bij mij staan, het is gewoon standaard, ik weet niet precies wat. Misschien ook wel juist omdat ik zo bewust ben van die aanrakingen dat aanrakingen relatief veel voor mij betekenen dat ik dit gewoon lastig is om gewoon comfortabel in te gaan zal ik maar zeggen. Maar misschien ook wel als het langer zou duren, dat het dan wel wat comfortabeler zou worden dit zijn natuurlijk vooral relatief korte, relatief korte aanrakingen maar als je gewoon gezellig met elkaar op de bank zit of zo dan wordt het op een gegeven moment toch wel wat relaxed.
Insecurity

[Avoider W, Female, 3.4.8]: Ja, als je daar [met mijn ouders of vriendje] een foutje mee maakt qua aanraking, ja dat gebeurt eigenlijk niet, maar dan zou het ook niet zo erg zijn, want je bent, je voelt je gewoon op je gemak bij elkaar. Bij dat andere [het begroeten van de vrienden van mijn vriendje] dan wil je toch een bepaalde indruk achterlaten. En dan wil je niet zo’n stomme indruk van, nouja ik deed iets raars ofzo, dat wil je niet. Zo wil je niet herinnert worden zeg maar.

[R]: Bij mensen die je kent, bedoel je? Of...

[Avoider W, Female, 3.4.9]: Ja en ook omdat je weet dat je, nouja je weet eigenlijk nog steeds niet perse wat je kan verwachten, maar als ze iets anders doen dan je verwacht had, dan voel ik me niet meteen ongemakkelijk ofzo. Dan kan je er gewoon meteen, dan kan je er om lachen ofzo, en dan...

[...] Dan is het niet zo van shit, wat doe ik nu. Dus dat is wel anders.

[Avoider W, Female, 3.4.10]: Want als je bijvoorbeeld echt in een kring staat en degene naast je die vertelt iets, dan kan ik mezelf wel bekeken voelen als ik dan eigenlijk iemand wil aanraken maar dan. Maar dat is misschien meer onzekerheid dan ook. [...] En omdat die drempel voor mij al wat hoger is denk ik dan bij sommige anderen om iemand aan te raken is het dan, ja dan ben ik me er nog bewuster van en zeker als er ook nog de aandacht erop gevestigd is van iedereen dus dan, dan zou ik toch sneller iemand niet aanraken dan als ik alleen met die persoon ben.

[Avoider W, Female, 3.4.11]: Nou, soms vind ik het wel moeilijk om te weten welke aanraking gepast is. Want bijvoorbeeld bij de vrienden van [name], dat is mijn vriendje, die geven allemaal op een andere manier, zeggen ze hoi zeg maar. [...] En omdat die drempel voor mij al wat hoger is denk ik dan bij sommige anderen om iemand aan te raken is het dan, ja dan ben ik me er nog bewuster van en zeker als er ook nog de aandacht erop gevestigd is van iedereen dus dan, dan zou ik toch sneller iemand niet aanraken dan als ik alleen met die persoon ben.

[Avoider W, Female, 3.4.12]: Ja, ik weet ten eerste niet op welke manier en als ik zie hoe zij, hoe mijn vriend dat met hem doet, dat betekent nog steeds niet dat die dat hetzelfde doet bij mij, zeg maar. Dus dan altijd heel frustrerend..

[Accepter T, Female, 3.7.13]: Dat weet ik eigenlijk niet, het is misschien meer dat ik me daar misschien iets onzeker in voel, dat ik denk van wat zou die ander er van vinden en het is niet dat ik per se iemand wil aanraken dus dan denk ik als je dat eerst bij mij doet dan weet ik wat jij fijn vind en hoever je kunt gaan. Dan kun je het terug doen, maar het is denk ik een beetje afwachten wat die ander vindt en als je het niet van tevoren weet dan ja.

[Avoider V, Male, 3.5.14]: Wanneer geef je ze wel een hand en wanneer niet, dat voel je denk ik aan.

[Avoider V, Male, 3.5.15]: Ik heb dan al vijf jaar een vriendin, maar je ziet het best vaak om je heen dat vrienden iemand proberen te versieren en dat jij al heel snel in de gaten hebt van “hou d’r maar mee op, dat werkt niet”. Maar ja, dan zie je toch wel van, dat kan twee kanten op gaan. Maar dan vind of dat meisje of hijzelf vind bepaalde handelingen niet fijn, en dat hoeft niet extreem te zijn,
maar dat kan al een hand op de schouder zijn ofzo. Ik kan me voorstellen dat als ik in de kroeg een hand op m’n schouder krijg dat ik daar niet blij mee zou zijn.

[R]: Is dat omdat, dat ongemakkelijke zeg maar, omdat die ander dan zo dichtbij komt of omdat je zelf, zelf met je lijf zeg maar dat moet doen? zelf met je lijf zeg maar dat moet doen?
[Avoider X, Male, 3.3.16]: Dat tweede vooral dat ik zelf ook nog terug moet gaan knuffelen en dan, nou is het ook niet fijn dat hij dichtbij komt, maar ik denk vooral het tweede dat ik ook nog zelf moet terug bewegen en vasthouden en ja...

[R]: Want voel je je vaardig in het geven van knuffels zeg maar?
[Avoider X, Male, 3.3.17]: Nee, ik doe het ook niet zo heel vaak dus.

Desire of more touch
[Avoider X, Male, 3.3.18]: Voelt niet zo heel fijn inderdaad [de bro-hug of bro-shake]. Je doet het omdat je moet, maar ik voel er me niet gemakkelijk bij. [...]. Het is gewoon, het hoort erbij, dus het is ook niet zo’n probleem, maar. Ja, ik ben er niet helemaal op mijn gemak mee.

[Avoider X, Male, 3.3.19]: Als ik een maand op vakantie ben geweest en ik kom terug dan, ons mam wil dan per se een omhelzing, daar kan ik niet omheen, maar als het aan mij zou liggen dan zou ik gewoon, dan kom ik aanlopen van hé hoe is het.

[R]: Geef je aan of als je iets niet wil bijvoorbeeld?
[Avoider X, Male, 3.3.20]: Nee, meestal laat ik het wel gewoon toe.
[R]: Ja oké dat je het ondergaat zeg maar.
[Avoider X, Male, 3.3.21]: Ja ik onderta het en dan is het over twee seconden ook weer klaar. Het is niet, ik ga niet liggen strijden om niks zeg maar dat is, tenzij iemand bijvoorbeeld een hand geeft en dan blijf je 5 seconden staan met een hand geven dan heb je wel, dan probeer je wel zijn hand los te schudden, maar.

[Avoider X, Male, 3.3.22]: Meestal heb ik het gevoel dat het moet zeg maar, de aanrakingen. Maar, af en toe als ik zelf de keuze heb, die zijn er dus wel, dus bijvoorbeeld met dat bedanken, dan. Als ik de keuze zou hebben dan denk ik niet dat ik ’t zou doen. Tenzij die persoon er echt heel erg klaar voor staat. Dan heb ik zelf nog een beetje dat gevoel van nou dat moet dan. Maar als ze d’r niet direct klaar voor staan dan is dat gevoel van het moeten ook een beetje weg, omdat hij dan niet klaar voor staat, dus hij heeft zelf het gevoel van dat het niet per se moet. Anders zou ‘ie er wel meer open voor staan.

[Avoider W, Female, 3.4.23]: Ja, want bijvoorbeeld één van mijn ploeggenootjes die is heel snel van het knuffelen. En dan is de stap veel makkelijker gezet voor mezelf als ik haar zou willen knuffelen om haar een knuffel te geven dan als het iemand is die ik nog nooit een knuffel heb gegeven of die mij nog nooit een knuffel heeft gegeven om dan, die stap te maken om dat te doen.
[R]: Oke, omdat je dan weet hoe het aanvoelt, of omdat je dan..?
[Avoider W, Female, 3.4.24]: Dan weet ik dat het oke is ofzo, om dat te doen, en omdat ik eigenlijk meer weet dat die persoon het fijn vindt ofzo. Want ik kan mij, ja voor mijzelf hoeft het niet perse, maar omdat ik weet dat diegene dat wel fijn vindt dan, dan maak ik sneller die stap om gewoon een knuffel te geven dan, te zeggen wat je gaat zeggen ofzo.
More touch wanted by touch avoider

[R]: Heb je zelf de behoefte om iemand aan te raken?
[Avoider Y, Male, 3.2.25]: Ja soms wel, al vind ik het dan dus wel moeilijk om echt de stap te zetten. Het is gewoon een relatief hoge drempel waar ik dan eerst even mentaal overheen moet voordat ik me er toe kan zetten om iemand een knuffel of een hand [te geven], niet echt een hand maar knuffels wel zeker.

[R]: Als ik het goed begrijp, als je dus iets zou willen veranderen dan zou je zelf vaker het initiatief willen nemen.
[Avoider Y, Male, 1.2.26]: Ja.

[R]: Zijn er momenten waarop je denkt oeh nu had ik eigenlijk ‘t wel willen doen?
[Avoider Y, Male, 1.2.27]: Ik heb wel vaker bij mensen als ze dichtbij zijn en gewoon even in een kutbui zijn, als ze gewoon even een stomme dag hebben, dan vind ik het toch heel moeilijk om ze soort van te troosten zeg maar, dat lukt mij niet zo goed. Op zich zou ik op dat soort moment, best willen.

[R]: Want zou je een aanraking gebruiken om iemand te steunen? Of pak je dat op een andere manier aan?
[Avoider X, Male, 3.3.28]: Ik zou het wel doen maar ik zou het wel ongemakkelijk vinden. Dan kan het ook wel zijn dat de ander de hele situatie een beetje ongemakkelijk is omdat iemand verdrietig is of zo dat is sowieso wel een beetje van dat je denkt oeh. Dus maar uiteindelijk zou ik het wel doen maar het zou wel even duren voordat ik zelf de stap zet om het te doen. Ik heb het al wel een paar keer meegemaakt dat die zo zit, dan zit je eigenlijk als je dan half uur zit, dan zit je de eerste minuten van ja, nee, ja euh nee en dan geef je toch maar een keertje een schouderklopje want dan is het ook weer klaar.

Negotiation strategies

[R]: Dan zou je dus eerder volgen, achteraan de rij aansluiten dat je kijkt wat doet de rest.
[Accepter T, Female, 3.7.29]: Ja precies dat. Soms vind ik het ook lastig, moet ik iemand wel of niet drie zoenen geven, dan denk ik nah dan kijk ik eerst wel even bij andere mensen.

[R]: Ben jij dan degene die het vaakst initiatief neemt met aanrakingen?
[Accepter Z, Female, 1.1.30]: Ik heb vrij knuffelige vrienden, dat wisselt. Ik stel het meestal wel verbaal voor. Wil je een knuffel of een hand zeg maar. Dat is als ik niet zeker weet. Ik bied het wel zelf aan het komt dus wel vaak vanuit mij.

[Accepter T, Female, 3.7.31]: Ja want van sommige mensen weet je gewoon niet hoe aanrakerig ze zijn en dan is het gewoon, soms kun je het echt aflezen aan een persoon of kun je het zien of weet je dat. Maar ja soms weet je dat niet en dan vind ik het wel fijn om dan wel, dan wil ik het wel eerst weten voordat ik dichterbij kom.

[Avoider W, Female, 3.4.32]: Ja. De drempel is hoger voor mezelf om mensen aan te raken, denk ik. En soms merk ik ik aan mijzelf dat ik onbewust ook wel de drempel verhoog voor mensen die waarvan ik niet wil dat ze me aanraken of zo. Maar mensen waarmee ik het wel gewoon goed kan vinden en die dichter bij mij staan, die zullen mij sneller aanraken dan dat ik hun aanraak.
[R]: Oké, stel dat je op een huisfeest zou zijn en iemand die stelt zich voor, die zegt zijn naam en hij geeft dan een omhelzing, wat zou je daarvan vinden?
[Avoider X, Male, 3.3.3]: Dan zou ik er zo een beetje bijstaan van, dan geeft hij zeg maar de omhelzing en dan sta ik zo een beetje van euh oké waarom. Beetje..
[R]: Je staat stil en je knuffelt dus niet echt terug, het is meer zo van...
[Avoider X, Male, 3.3.34]: Euh oké, de eerstste halve seconde knuffel je dan niet terug omdat je dan zoiets hebt van waarom en dan toch maar weer wel anders is het ook zo van gemeen voor die persoon dan heeft hij ook weer zoiets van ooh.

[Avoider X, Male, 3.3.35]: Daar [mensen die ik niet kan uitstaan] wil ik eigenlijk geen aanraking van. Het is tolereerbaar, maar het is niet...

[R]: Ja. Even kijken. Want heb je wel eens het gevoel dat mensen jou aan willen raken maar dat jij dat eigenlijk niet wil?
[M, Avoider V, 3.5.36]: Mmmm, nee. Nee, ik denk dat de meeste mensen waarmee ik omga toch wel redelijk in de gaten hebben wanneer ik daar wel of wanneer ik dat wel fijn vind of wanneer niet. Hoogstens misschien een keer als ik een keer chagrijnig ben en nergens zin in heb. Dat mijn zusje me aanstoot en dat ik zo iets heb van. [...] Van loop maar even verder, het is goed. Maar nee niet omdat het dan die persoon is of mij aanraakt op een manier die ik niet fijn vind, dat niet.

[R]: Want hoe zou je, het gaat nu dus niet over close friends en zo, maar hoe zou je aangeven dat je een aanraking niet zou willen?
[Accepter T, Female, 3.7.37]: Ja in de stad word je wel eens aangeraakt door mensen en dan kan ik ook heel boos omdraaien of zo van ga maar weg. En soms gaat mijn vriend heel dicht tegen me aan zitten en dan denk ik van doe maar niet, dus dan zeg ik dat gewoon tegen hem. Ja voor de rest wend ik het eigenlijk niet echt af wat ik zo kan bedenken. Maar het is dus inderdaad, of als iemand een arm om je heen slaat en ik denk van ja dat hoeft even niet dan doe je hem er gewoon af, maar ja voor de rest.