
AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Volume 1, Number 1

Submitted: November 6, 2004

First Revision: December 7, 2004

Accepted: December 20, 2004

Publication Date: January 5, 2005

INTERNET DATING ADS: SEX, ETHNICITY, AGE-RELATED DIFFERENCES, AND SUPPORT FOR EVOLUTIONARY THEORY

Carl A. Bartling, Jared A. LeDoux, and Drew J. Thrasher
McNeese State University

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research project was to investigate possible sex, ethnicity, and age group differences involving the information placed in Internet dating ads, and to contrast the findings with predictions from evolutionary theory (e.g., women being more selective than men) and with findings from previous studies involving heterosexual dating ads placed in newspapers and magazines. Of particular interest were the types and number of characteristics sought in a dating partner. Results generally supported predictions from evolutionary theory. Women listed more desired characteristics for a partner than did men. Women focused more on non-physical attributes such as ambition and character than did men, and men focused more on youth and attractiveness than did women. There was; however, considerable similarity in terms of the five most desired attributes listed by both men and women. Women listed the following desired characteristics in men most often: humor, honesty, caring, openness, and personality. Men desired the following: affection, humor, honesty, openness, and attractive women. These desired characteristics were also significantly different from those found in recent studies which looked at dating ads placed in newspapers.

INTRODUCTION

One emerging aspect of dating in the 21st century is that of placing ads on Internet dating sites such as Match.com, eHarmony.com, or the personals on Yahoo.com. The dynamics of this early stage of establishing a dating relationship for adults are changing rapidly. Factors that are contributing to this rapid change include: dating advertisers' experiences with this medium, including both successes and failures; increasing sophistication of the services offered by the Internet dating sites (e.g., addition of personality questionnaires and other inventories to facilitate better matches, use of video clips to supplement still photos and text information, changes in information requested in ads); and influences from the popular culture such as TV and movies (e.g., recent movies that have emphasized "shallow" men who focus too much on physical attractiveness when selecting a dating partner).

The purpose of this research project was to investigate possible sex, ethnicity, and age group differences involving the information placed in Internet dating ads, and to contrast the findings with predictions from evolutionary theory (e.g., women being more selective than men) and with findings from previous studies involving heterosexual dating ads placed in newspapers and magazines. Sex, ethnicity, and age group (teens through 50s) served as the three primary demographic organizing variables. All three variables are meaningfully related to how individuals place their dating ads, and to past research with dating ads via newspapers and magazines (Goode, 1996; Lance, 1998).

Evolutionary and Socio-cultural Theories of Mate Preferences

Feingold (1992) asserted that evolutionary and socio-cultural explanations for sex differences in mate preferences do not have to be independent of one another. There has been evidence to support both theories. When dealing with research pertaining to mate preferences, whether one is assessing sex differences with normative and ipsative scales, personal want ads in newspapers and magazines, or personal ads placed on the Internet, it is important to evaluate the usefulness of both models.

Feingold (1992) pointed out that evolutionary theorists contend that sex differences in mate selection are due to sex differences in reproduction. Feingold employed the Parental Investment Model, which states that both men and women choose mates based on their reproductive capabilities (cf. Sprecher, Sullivan, & Hatfield, 1994). Since women can only have a limited number of children, they will look for "non-appearance-related factors" in a mate, such as socio-economic status (SES), intelligence, character, and ambitiousness (Feingold, 1992, p. 125). Men will look at youth and appearance, because these factors signal a woman's ability to reproduce (Sprecher et al., 1994).

In a meta-analysis of 26 studies employing a questionnaire method, Feingold (1992) found the largest sex differences were for SES and ambitiousness, with women seeking those characteristics more than men. Feingold found moderate-sized sex differences for character and intelligence, again with women seeking these characteristics more than men did; however, there were no gender differences for personality and humor. According to the Parent Investment Model, women would consider SES and ambitiousness as highly important for the survival of their offspring, and women would consider character and intelligence important, but of secondary importance. No sex differences existed for humor and personality because these characteristics would not directly influence reproductive outcomes for either of the sexes.

Feingold (1992) used Buss' (1989) descriptive statistics of a cross-cultural study involving data from 33 countries to determine effect sizes. There were no significant difference in preference

for physically attractive partners between North American samples and international samples, but men exhibited a greater preference for physically attractive mates than did women. Also, there was no significant difference in emphasis on SES between the two samples, but women placed more emphasis on SES than did men.

Sprecher et al. (1994) found that men were more likely than women to marry someone: without a steady job, five years younger than themselves, who earned less money, and who had less education. These researchers also found that women were more likely to marry someone: who was not good-looking, five years older than themselves, who earned more money, and who had more education. They pointed out that while one could attribute these sex differences to reproductive strategies, one could also explain the differences in terms of women's poorer economic opportunities and traditional sex role socialization processes. Similarly, Feingold (1992) pointed out that social approval could have a direct effect on romantic behavior by women choosing partners based on SES rather than attractiveness.

Newspaper and Magazine Ads versus Internet Ads

As Jagger (1998) has documented, the use of dating ads is not a new phenomenon. For instance, there were the mail order bride systems in the 1800s and matchmaker services for immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Steinfirst & Moran, 1989). Problems with these approaches and ensuing bad publicity kept them from receiving wide acceptance for many decades (Boyes, 1997; Jagger, 1998). According to Bolig, Stein, and McKenry (1984), it was not until the 1980s that dating ads received a wider acceptance. In the 1990s, service providers began supplementing newspaper and magazine dating ads with telephone voice links so that parties could move beyond static written information about a potential dating partner (Coupland, 1996).

Important emphases of past research on newspaper and magazine dating ads have involved sex and age differences in desired characteristics of a heterosexual dating partner. For example, Lance (1998) studied sex differences in heterosexual dating ads placed in a metropolitan newspaper in the southeastern part of the United States. His findings indicated that men emphasized good looks, personality, slimness, a professional-college degree, and nonsmoking. Women emphasized personality, professional-college degree, good looks, nonsmoking, height, and slimness.

Lance's approach is consistent with psychological research conducted by a variety of researchers that has taken a trait approach to conceptualizing people and emphasized gender-role expectations (Davis, 1990; Deaux & Hanna, 1984). Researchers, especially evolutionary theorists according to Jagger (1998), have emphasized that men were more likely in the past to seek attractiveness, appealing body shape and youth; whereas, women were more likely to seek resource attributes and indicators of commitment to a possible relationship (e.g., older, wealthier, marriage-minded men). A wide variety of studies, including many that looked at dating ads in newspapers and magazines, have produced results that support these sex differences (Rajecki, Bledsoe, & Rasmussen, 1992; Stewart, Stinnet, & Rosenfeld, 2000; Willis & Carlson, 1993).

Some studies have shown, however, that dating advertisers portray themselves counter to traditional gender-role stereotypes. For instance, Davis (1990) reported that women valued men who were warm, sensitive, emotionally supportive, and loving – stereotypical “feminine” rather than “masculine” traits. Strassberg and Holty (2003) found that Internet dating ads that described women as “financially independent...successful [and] ambitious,” produced over 50% more responses than ads describing women as “lovely...very attractive and slim.”

Koestner and Wheeler (1988) have emphasized the idea that because self-advertising involves strategic activities, advertisers would analyze what potential dating partners would want and then modify their ads to fit those perceptions. If this assumption is correct, then one would

expect to see advertisers on Internet dating sites using a wide variety of strategies, and changing their strategies as they become more experienced with attempting to find a dating partner via the Internet. For example, if an advertiser's goal was simply to obtain E-mail responses to his or her ad, then the advertiser may choose to specify few, if any, defining characteristics for an opposite-gender match. On the other hand, if Internet dating advertisers had tried that approach in the past and had felt that they had been wasting valuable time in hunting for a desired partner, then they might try a very detailed and prescriptive approach to describing who they are seeking for a dating partner (i.e., specifying many characteristics).

We chose Match.com for our study as it is, and has been, the most popular and most widely used Internet dating site for nearly ten years. It has over 12 million profiles listed on its web site with individuals from over 150 countries in 18 local languages, spanning six continents (LexisNexis™ Academic, 2004). Other reasons we chose this Internet dating site include: its openness to the general public without paying any fees to post a profile or to engage in a search of the database, and its "custom search" feature that allows one to conduct a stratified random search based on various demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender) or conduct searches using specific search terms such as "mate," "marriage partner," "date," or other defining characteristic of the purpose of the ad placement.

One could assert that access to the Internet and an Internet dating site is not available to everyone, and thus the results pertaining to a study of personal ads placed on the Internet would not be as readily generalized as results from previous research studies utilizing newspapers or magazines that are more open to the public. On the other hand, new figures have indicated that the number of people worldwide who are users of the Internet has surpassed 739 million in 2004 and continues to grow rapidly (De Argaez, 2004).

In the current study we expected to find support for evolutionary theory in terms of women being more selective than men. However, we expected specific attributes being sought by women and men via the Internet to differ from those recently found with magazine and newspaper ads (Lance, 1998).

METHOD

Participants

One hundred men and 100 women who listed their profiles on Match.com during February, 2004 served as participants. Their ages ranged from 18 to 59, and they were all from the United States. Ethnic composition of the sample was as follows: 81% White, 8.5% Black, 7% Hispanic, and 3.5% Asian American.

Design

The primary participant stratification variables in this 2 x 5 independent-groups, archival study were sex and age-decade group (teens through 50s). The primary dependent (response) variable was the number of attributes a person specified for members of the opposite sex in their narrative paragraph under the section "About me and who I'd like to date." The researchers recorded data for 38 other variables, including demographic information (e.g., age, ethnicity) and response items from the ads (e.g., desired body type for members of the opposite sex, maximum distance away).

Elements of an Internet Dating Profile on Match.com

Each profile consists of two primary types of information: information about the individual placing the ad, and information about a desired "date" or desired "friend." The types of information

in the profile include: screen name that may or may not be descriptive of the individual, optional photo(s), “About me and who I’d like to date” (i.e. narrative paragraph(s) that describe self and desired other, often divided into the two separate sub-sections), “Appearance” (e.g., height, eye color), “Interests” (e.g., for fun, sports and exercise), “Lifestyle” (e.g., smoking and drinking habits, job, income, information about kids), “Background/Values” (e.g., ethnicity, faith, education, languages, politics), and “About My Date” (i.e. Appearance, Lifestyle, and Background/Values describing one’s ideal date).

The following is an example description from a “who I’d like to date” sub-section of a profile: “Honest, friendly, easy going, giving, caring and smiling most of the time. Likes to fish, romantic, upbeat, and enjoys life.” The current researchers would have scored this description as containing 10 attributes depicting the ideal date for an individual placing the ad.

Operational Definitions for Responses

The measure of selectivity was a simple counting of the number of attributes specified for the other person in the narrative paragraph that comprised the response to the category “About me and who I’d like to date” (see example above).

The researchers used the potential response categories from Match.com for a given categorical response whenever possible. For example, “body type” included the following response selections and corresponding Likert-scale ratings in parentheses: slender (1), athletic and toned (2), about average (3), a few extra pounds (4), big and beautiful (5), full-figured (5), curvy (5), stocky (5), and heavyset (5). Selections for possible “ethnicities” include: Asian, Black/African descent, Latino/Hispanic, Middle Eastern, Native American, Pacific Islander, White/Caucasian, and other. The interested reader or researcher could log on to Match.com and then use the “Custom Search” feature to view response items and response selections available for a given response item.

Procedure

For each given search of the Internet dating site, the researcher specified sex of the hypothetical match seeker, opposite sex of those listing their profiles, age-decade group, country (United States), and those supplying photos. From the profiles retrieved (50 profiles for each search), the researchers then randomly chose two blocks of 10 profiles each from which to record relevant data. Thus, for each of the 10 sex x age-decade groups, the researcher recorded data from 20 profiles. For any responses that a person failed to provide (e.g., ad placer’s income), the researcher simply left blanks on the data sheets.

Match.com has a “custom search” feature that allows one to specify stratification variables such as sex, age decade, those supplying a photo, and country. A given search automatically retrieves 50 random profiles from the Match.com database. We chose profiles for those supplying a photo for purposes of ecological validity since users of such Internet sites typically specify this feature when viewing profiles of others. It also provided some visual confirmation of sex and approximate age decade for a given individual.

RESULTS

Gender Comparisons

Attributes specified in narrative paragraph for a desired partner. Women specified more attributes for a desired partner ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 3.78$) than did men ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 2.69$), $F(1,190) = 10.45$, $p = .001$, partial eta squared = .052. Women were more likely to specify attributes dealing with ambition (i.e. “having goals” or “successful”) for a partner (21%) than were men (4%), chi-square (1) = 13.21, $p < .001$. Women also specified character traits such as honesty (34%) more

often than did men (19%), chi-square (1) = 5.99, $p = .014$. Men were more likely to desire attractiveness (17%) in a partner than were women (6%), chi-square (1) = 5.94, $p = .015$. Women listed the following desired characteristics in men most often: humor (38%), honesty (34%), caring (24%), openness (20%), and personality (17%). Men desired the following: affection (35%), humor (23%), honesty (19%), openness (19%), and attractive women (17%). Statistics for these comparisons appear in Table 1.

Table 1
Sex Comparisons for Variables in Internet Dating Ads

<u>Dating Ad Variable</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Descriptive Statistics</u>		<u>Inferential Statistics</u>	
		<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>t (198)</u>	<u>p</u>
Desired characteristics listed for date	Women	4.33	3.78	3.23	.001
	Men	2.83	2.69		
Number of interests advertiser listed	Women	6.66	4.96	3.07	.002
	Men	4.81	3.43		
Height difference acceptable (in.)	Women	15.78	8.66	8.46	.001
	Men	4.37	10.34		
Age difference (other older) acceptable	Women	7.18	4.48	7.08	.001
	Men	2.44	4.98		
Income (in thousands of dollars per year)	Women	30.75	29.33	-2.22	.028
	Men	44.78	42.91		
Acceptable ethnic groups for a dating partner	Women	3.49	2.25	-2.53	.012
	Men	4.26	2.02		
Number of type of pets advertiser owns	Women	1.17	1.18	3.66	.001
	Men	0.66	0.76		
Self-rating of body type	Women	2.95	1.58	2.03	.044
	Men	2.56	1.10		

(slender = 1 .. heavy = 5)

Attributes specified for a desired partner in profile categories. Women were more willing to accept an older partner ($M = 7.18$ years older, $SD = 4.48$) than were men ($M = 2.44$ years older, $SD = 4.98$), $t(198) = 7.08$, $p < .001$. Women were more selective in terms of ethnic groups ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 2.25$) than were men ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 2.02$), $t(198) = -2.53$, $p = .012$.

Age Differences

Attributes specified in narrative paragraph for a desired partner. Number of attributes specified for a member of the opposite sex in the narrative paragraph did not vary as a function of

age-decade group, $F(4,190) = 1.56, p > .18$. The interaction of sex by age-decade group also failed to reach statistical significance, $F(4,190) < 1, p > .75$.

Attributes specified in profile categories about the individual placing the ad. Marital status patterns, exercise habits (none, occasional, regular), and attitude about wanting kids (no, unsure, yes) changed significantly across the age-decade groups from the teens through the 50s, chi-square (12) = 70.72, $p < .01$, chi-square (8) = 17.87, $p = .022$, and chi-square (8) = 111.43, $p < .001$, respectively. Concerning marital status, those in their teens and 20s were almost all single; whereas 40-44% of those in their 30s, 40s, and 50s were divorced; and from 5-20% were either widowed or separated. Concerning exercise habits, the modal response for teens was "exercise occasionally" (43%); whereas the modal response for those who were older was "exercise regularly" (43-63%). Concerning the question about wanting kids, the modal response for teens and 20s was "yes" (70% each), for those in their 30s and 40s it was "unsure" (40-45%), and almost everyone in their 50s responded "no" (90%).

Average income, age difference acceptable (older partner), number of sports and exercise habits, and years of education were significantly different across the age-decade groups (see Table 2 for descriptive and inferential statistics).

Table 2

Age Group Comparisons for Numeric Variables in Internet Dating Ads

Dating Ad Variable	Age	Mean	N	SD	F	p	Partial Eta Sq.
Income (\$1000 per year)	Teens	7.29	35	11.9	11.97	< .001	.268
	20s	35.37	27	35.2			
	30s	53.15	27	39.4			
	40s	54.62	26	42.4			
	50s	51.67	21	28.0			
Age difference acceptable (older partner)	Teens	5.550	40	4.685	2.72	.031	.053
	20s	6.200	40	4.603			
	30s	5.325	40	4.736			
	40s	4.225	40	5.815			
	50s	2.750	40	5.965			
Number of sports and exercise habits	Teens	6.775	40	4.258	3.86	.005	.073
	20s	6.400	40	4.797			
	30s	6.775	40	3.340			
	40s	5.725	40	3.595			
	50s	3.950	40	2.736			
Years of education	Teens	12.575	40	0.747	10.51	< .001	.181
	20s	14.605	38	2.175			
	30s	14.750	40	2.239			
	40s	14.795	39	2.054			
	50s	15.211	38	2.429			

Ethnicity Differences

Attributes specified in narrative paragraph for a desired partner. The average numbers of attributes specified for the four ethnic groups were: Asian ($M = 6.00, SD = 5.22, N = 7$), Hispanic ($M = 5.43, SD = 5.65, N = 14$), Black ($M = 2.76, SD = 1.79, N = 17$), and White ($M = 3.40, SD =$

3.06, $N = 162$). Individual t -tests showed that the average numbers of attributes for the Asian and Hispanic advertisers were higher than those for the White or Black advertisers, $ps < .05$. These comparisons were significant only if one assumed equal variances, which was not the case according to Levene's test for equality of variances, $SEs = .24$ to 1.98 , $ps < .05$.

Correlations

Table 3 presents an organized summary of the correlations for most of the numeric variables.

Table 3

Correlation Matrix for Variables in Internet Dating Ads

Dating Ad Variable	<u>DCs</u>	<u>Es</u>	<u>Fs</u>	<u>\$</u>	<u>Is</u>	<u>PL</u>	<u>SAE</u>	<u>UDA</u>	<u>YOE</u>
Age.....	-.23*	-.15	-.01	.50*	.04	.11	-.22*	-.23*	.36*
Desired characteristics (DCs)..	.18	-.14	.01	.25*	.34*	.10	.14	.01	
Ethnicities (Es).....		.10	-.10	-.04	.06	.01	.12	-.03	
Faiths (Fs).....			.15	-.06	-.04	.06	.03	.20*	
Income (\$).....				-.03	.23*	.03	-.25*	.55*	
Interests (Is).....					.14	.17*	.05	.04	
Paragraph length (PL).....						.15	.08	.21*	
Sports and exercise (SAE).....							.03	.05	
Upper dating age (UDA).....								-.14	
Years of education (YOE).....									

Note: * $p < .01$, with $N = 136-200$

Reliability of Measurements

Attributes specified in narrative paragraph for a desired partner. Using a sample of 55 profiles, the inter-rater reliability was .965, $p < .001$. Test-retest reliability for a sample of 80 profiles measured one week apart was .980, $p < .001$.

Attributes specified in profile categories about the individual placing the ad. Percentage agreement on categorical responses such as "Income" for inter-rater agreement and score-rescore agreement varied from 98% to 100% on five responses measured for 80 profiles.

DISCUSSION

Results in general supported predictions from evolutionary theory. Women were more selective than were men in terms of the number of attributes specified for a desired partner in the narrative paragraph. However, the effect size for this difference in selectivity was surprisingly small (partial eta squared = .052). Women focused more on non-physical attributes such as ambition and character than did men, and men focused more on youth and attractiveness than did

women. Women were more selective than were men in terms of ethnicity of a potential dating partner, but were less selective when it came to age.

Not surprisingly, the information that dating advertisers provided in their Internet ads varied significantly as a function of sex and age group. There were both overlapping characteristics and differences in terms of which characteristics men and women sought in a heterosexual dating partner. Women emphasized humor, honesty, caring, openness, and personality; and men desired affection, humor, honesty, openness, and attractive women. These current results contrast sharply with those found by Lance (1998) when assessing newspaper dating ads. In that study, women emphasized personality, professional-college degree, good looks, nonsmoking, height, and slimness; and men emphasized good looks, personality, slimness, professional-college degree, and nonsmoking.

Researchers from a variety of disciplines have argued that men are much less selective than are women when it comes to finding a mate or dating partner (Batten, 1992; Buss, 1994; Goode, 1996). For example, Goode contended that men employ a “wide net” policy in seeking a sexual or dating partner. Thus, being less specific in one’s description of a potential dating partner in a dating ad is clearly consistent with the notion of casting a “wide net.” Being less specific may result in a greater number of E-mail responses to one’s dating ad, but many of these responders may be lacking in desirable characteristics for a long-term relationship.

Stewart et al. (2000) have put the concept of gender selectivity differences in a different light. They emphasized the notion that men are typically looking for a short-term relationship while women are more likely to be looking for a long-term relationship. They found that men and women are more selective when they are looking for a long-term relationship, and both men and women are less selective when they are looking for a short-term relationship.

Age group differences included: marital status patterns, exercise habits, attitude about wanting kids, average income, age difference acceptable (older), number of sports and exercise habits, and years of education. Most of these outcomes were hardly surprising (e.g., nearly all of those in their teens and 20s were single, and larger proportions of those 30 and older were divorced). Of particular note, however, was the finding that younger adults were more accepting of an upper age difference than were individuals in their 40s and 50s. Assuming that this finding is valid, further research may unearth other interesting and related phenomena. For example, are there age-group differences in terms of truthfulness of advertisers reporting their age?

The only ethnic group difference in this study was for the number of attributes specified for a desired partner of the opposite sex. However, 81% of the sample was White, leaving only 19% of the composition of the sample for the three minority groups (Asian, Black, and Latino/Hispanic). In a separate follow-up study, we sampled an equal number of profiles (100) for each of these four ethnic groups. Selectivity (number of attributes specified in the narrative paragraph for a desired partner) was not significantly different across the four ethnic groups ($F < 1$).

Some mention should be made of terminology that we used. Match.com and most other Internet personal sites label themselves as “dating” web sites and explicitly request individuals to select either “dating” or “friendship” when posting their profiles and when searching the profiles of others on their databases. None of them use the term “mating,” which is a term that researchers focusing on evolutionary theory would be likely to use. Such researchers could readily argue that some of the individuals who use Internet sites which list personal ads are searching for a mate rather than a date, or that looking for a date is a natural step in the process of finding a mate. Indeed, a small percentage of individuals who use Match.com explicitly advertise that they are looking for a mate or marital partner, but the vast majority of individuals using the site do not do

so. One could expect meaningful differences in profiles (e.g., how many attributes they list for a desired partner of the opposite sex) between those who emphasize that they are looking for a date compared with those who are looking for a long-term mate. Researchers should be able to test this and other assumptions by using the “custom search” feature with Match.com by specifying relevant search phrases (e.g., “mate” or “marital partner” versus “date”), thus making Match.com a highly useful site for future archival research.

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