



Things change with age: Educational assortment in online dating



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ABSTRACT

To identify the factors that influence educational assortment in an online dating setting, we analyse 219,013 participant contacts by 41,936 members of the Australian online dating web site RSVP over a four-month period. Consistent with prior research, we find that more educated online daters are consistently likely to assort positively (homogamy) meaning that they are more likely to contact potential mates with the same level of education. However, as the more educated cohort gets older they care less about homogamy while less educated daters become more interested in homogamy which leads to an increase in similarity towards caring for the same educational level. On the other hand, older and more educated online daters are less likely to contact those with lower educational levels compared to their own while women are more likely to contact a potential mate with higher educational levels relative to their own (hypergammy). Our interaction analysis also reveals fewer differences in educational hypergammy among older online participants but a greater likelihood of online daters contacting mates with lower levels of education among younger males and older females. Further research is therefore warranted on technology's impact on human mating behaviour; in particular, the psychology employed by humans using the Internet to maximize their chances of matching their educational preferences in a mate.

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*Mate choice is not a random roll of the dice, nor is it the search for universal signs of beauty upon which everyone agrees. There is, as the maxim goes, "a lid for every pot". Aside from searching for those signs which everyone finds attractive, each individual is also searching for his or her own version of that perfection. That person is the one who is most like themselves.*Keller, Thiessen, & Young, 1996. p. 221

1. Introduction

Assortative mating (or homogamy) refers to the non-random matching of individuals based on a preference for a similar or shared feature (Buss, 1985). For over half a century, assortative mating research has identified and explored a range of characteristics and traits that individuals not only prefer but actually choose in a partner, including symmetry in factors such as age, aesthetics, attractiveness, personality, culture, education, religion and race (Berscheid, Dion, Walster, & Walster, 1971; Buss, 1985; Little, Penton-Voak, Burt, & Perrett, 2003; Mare, 1991; Vandenberg, 1972). More recent

research has even used genome-wide genotype data to measure the magnitude to which married couples assort genetically (Guo, Wang, Liu, & Randall, 2014, p. 2). This plethora of research underscores the importance of understanding the psychology of actual mate choice behaviour rather than mere stated preference in human mating scenarios.

The Internet has created a completely new conduit through which humans can search for a mate. It constitutes a non-sequential decision-making setting for mate choice, one that permits multiple partner choices in real time facilitating significantly greater available choice of potential mates, particularly on factors such as education that may have historically constrained the number of potential mates. Thus, not only does this technology reduce and possibly even eliminate previous propinquity and sequential constraints in the human mating market, it increases the opportunity set (for available choice) for potential mates. This increased pool of potential mates also means greater opportunity for selection of partners with lower, similar or even higher levels of certain characteristics, traits or endowments. Education is also an interesting factor as it is commonly used in human mating behaviour as a proxy for resources and future provision helping to gain reproductive or (economic) advantages (Buss, 1985). The online dating environment allows to observe whether individuals select lower, similar, or higher levels of education than themselves providing insights how the selection changes for individual differences (e.g., related to gender or education) across age. Thus, to understand how technology is impacting or facilitating mate choice decisions based on education, we analyse the

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mating behaviour (rather than mere preferences) of over 41,000 members of the Australian online dating web site RSVP¹ and their 219,013 contact decisions across the four months of January to April 2016.

2. Background

Because choosing a mate can be one of the largest psychological and economic decisions humans can make, social science's extensive explorations of mate choice behaviour represent a broad range of disciplines, including sociology, economics, (evolutionary) psychology and reproductive medicine (Buss, 1985; Whyte, Torgler, & Harrison, 2016). All these disciplines however, no matter their differences, uniformly acknowledge one phenomenon: positive assortative mating behaviour (homogamy) among humans. Such homogamy is essentially generated by two preference sets in the mating market. In the first, both males and females prefer partners with characteristics, traits or endowments that are symmetrical to their own and so choose each other. In the second, both males and females prefer a particular characteristic, trait or endowment (Schwartz, 2013) – for example, wealth, education or career success – and so choose a similarly wealthy, educated or successful mate. In either case, whether through matching or competition, individuals select partners that are more alike than would be the case based on random choice alone.

One advantage of positive assortment is its evolutionary payoff: it ensures the gene transmission optimization that comes from mating with those who share common genes (Thiessen & Gregg, 1980) while also “increas[ing] the degree to which parents share genes with offspring” (Thiessen, Young, & Delgado, 1997, p. 162), which elevates fitness. Symmetrical preferences may thus stem not only from risk minimization but also from an innate recognition mechanism, such as sexual imprinting (Bereczkei, Gyuris, & Weisfeld, 2004). The benefits of positive assortment, however, may go beyond the biological: at a micro level, it can mean increased socio-economic and productivity gains in both the short and long term (Rushton, 1988). For example, education-based assortment can confer a range of benefits from improved lifetime health and well-being to increased wages and access to healthcare. It can also bring about greater economic understanding and increased gender equity within a marriage (Shafer, 2013). Assortative mating may be a way to optimise mate choice by selecting a partner with a certain degree of symmetry (Bateson, 1983). This may foster altruistic behaviour inside the family unit, increase marital stability and may even help realise greater fecundity (Penton-Voak, Perrett, & Peirce, 1999; Rushton, 1988, 1989). As such, humans (and other animals) may in fact be able “to detect genetic similarity between themselves and others” (Russell, Wells, & Rushton, 1985, p. 183) leading to a preference for stronger similarity on (highly heritable traits and/or) factors like intelligence or education.

As female participation in the labour force and tertiary education increasingly comes to resemble male participation, gender equity between men and women could lead to increasingly symmetrical preferences based on education (Mare, 1991). Because education can be a proxy for resources and their ongoing provision, from a sexual selection perspective, there should be more competition for men and women at the top of the education spectrum (Rose, 2005). This should normatively further encourage positive educational assortment.

The task of finding a mate has always had opportunity costs because individuals have certain preferences, face constrained supplies and also compete with others to maximize their mate choice (Schwartz, 2013). For example, the traditional geographic constraints of local neighbourhoods, cities and towns meant that the available supply of potential mates was finite, generating a choice constraint in the mating market of the type generally labelled propinquity (Vandenberg, 1972). Yet even in local populations, assortative mating patterns at the

phenotypic level always had benefits because individuals could “avoid the costs of leaving the immediate environment to mate” (Penton-Voak et al., 1999, p. 105). The arrival of the Internet however, has expanded available choices to the point of a quasi-unbounded human mating market. On line, the click of a button results in a myriad of potential mates, thereby reducing potential search costs to virtually zero.

Even though available choices are notionally infinite, socio-economic (and particularly educational) barriers remain. The resulting distance, whether economic or social, means higher inequality, which may in fact increase education or income-based homogamy (Schwartz, 2013) across the socio-economic distribution. Normatively, these increases in variance may facilitate or encourage males and females to favour the convenience of individuals at each socio-economic equity extreme (Buss, 1985). Such a preference may then propel the remaining individuals with less extreme characteristics (e.g., average educational levels) to pair up based on similarity (Sloman & Sloman, 1988). Generational increases in positive educational homogamy could thus increase inequality and constrain socio-economic opportunity and achievement for offspring (Mare, 1991). Theoretically then greater educational homogamy should increase economic inequality (Schwartz, 2013) because of the education-earnings link. Research shows that residents of less educationally favourable marriage markets are more likely than those in more highly educated markets to marry hypogamously based on education, with the chance of women doing so increasing with age (Lewis & Oppenheimer, 2000). Research into whether the Internet is facilitating or accentuating changes in educational assortment behaviour and its impact on social equity is still in its infancy.

In addition, as the Internet increases in popularity as a mating tool it may be crowding out more historical social intermediaries like work, school and local neighbourhoods (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). This is not to say that the geographic proximity of potential partners has become redundant but rather that online searches for mates generally cover a much greater geographic area than the small radius of local neighbourhoods (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). As this greater coverage translates into a significant increase in available choices, it may also change the structure of mate searches. In particular, new dating technology like the Internet may actually increase the possibility of homogamous selections (Schwartz, 2013), and in some online dating segments – particularly those facing thin dating markets – it may encourage the convergence of particular characteristics.

This research seeks to identify the factors that influence internet educational assortment behaviour, thereby expanding behavioural science's understanding of mate choice psychology and decision-making in large scale settings. In particular, by exploring deviations from positive educational assortment, it aims to distinguish the factors influencing education based mate choice decisions in the 2016 online dating market.

3. Method

3.1. Participant pool

Our data set, collected from the Australian online dating web site RSVP, encompasses 41,936 unique online dating individuals (2016), who, as part of their web site membership, have provided a wealth of personal details, including height, hair colour, eye colour, body type, sexuality, marital status, ethnicity, religious views, political affiliations, personality type and offspring.² As on most online dating web sites, RSVP users also have the option to provide their ideal preference for each of the characteristics for which they are searching or would prefer in an ideal partner. For the purposes of this study, the participant set is limited to online daters who self-identified as heterosexual (99.60% of

² Body type, education level and personality type are all measured on a five-point scale (lightest to heaviest, high school to post graduate study, and very private to very social, respectively).

¹ See <https://www.rsvp.com.au/>.

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