



Comparing narratives of personal and preferred partner characteristics in online dating advertisements

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ABSTRACT

This study explored online personal ads of 294 heterosexual and homosexual men and women in the United States through a qualitative analysis and comparison of participant-generated “personal” and “preferred partner” narratives. Nine characteristics were identified and combined into three overarching categories: physical, lifestyle, and personality characteristics. These three personal and preferred partner characteristics were examined for difference by gender, sexual orientation, age and desired relationship type of the advertisers. Main effects emerged for all four predictors, most notably for age and desired relationship type. Additionally, this study explored the possibility that personal and preferred partner narratives contained similar constellations of characteristics, finding significant correlations on all three variables, lending support for the matching hypothesis in dating partner characteristics.

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1. Introduction

Technological innovations over the past ten years have produced a steep increase in the use of online dating websites, which have provided an efficient avenue for individuals seeking many different kinds of companionship (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Hardey, 2004). Indeed, it has been estimated that over 20 million individuals access online dating websites every month (Online Dating Magazine, 2007) and that about half of adults in the United States report knowing at least one person who has dated someone they met online (PRWed.com, 2009). Diverse options of dating websites are available, based on special interests, orientations, and geographies (Arvidsson, 2006). These websites often allow participants to search for romantic partners based on demographic and personal characteristics such as gender, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, religious affiliation, education, hobbies, and many other desired attributes. They provide fertile ground for romantic and sexual identity construction, as individuals are able to select and generate an almost unlimited amount of information to share with and request from potential romantic partners.

As such, examining the content of personal ads is one way to determine what characteristics men and women purport to desire in romantic partners and what they believe others desire in them (Gonzalez & Meyers, 1993). Indeed, Jagger (2005) stated that “dating advertisements are a revealing site for examining the social

construction of identities - identities that are deemed desirable and marketable in a specific cultural context and constituted in normative (hetero)sexuality” (p. 90). Additionally, while it may be argued that online dating profiles are rife with lies and exaggerations, research indicates that online advertisers are actually dually interested in presenting desirable and realistic portrayals of self (Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008; Whitty, 2008). Despite the proliferation of online dating websites and rich data they offer, only a handful of studies examine how online advertisers represent themselves and what they see as desirable attributes to further our understanding of contemporary romantic and sexual identities (e.g., Ellison et al., 2006; Gibbs et al., 2006; Jagger, 2001) and few studies have compared offered and requested characteristics in personal ads (e.g., Cicerello & Sheehan, 1995; Harrison & Saeed, 1977).

The present study extends past research examining the personal characteristics of individuals in the United States posting personal ads through a qualitative analysis and comparison of participant-generated “personal narratives” and “preferred partner narratives”. More specifically, the examination will provide information regarding how young adults chose to present themselves as desirable dating partners, which characteristics they outline as desirable in others, and how these characteristics might differ based on demographic variables and desired type of relationship. Additionally, by examining both personal and preferred partner narratives simultaneously, we are able to explore whether individuals tend to indicate wanting similar or divergent characteristics in their romantic partners. The new approach of making use of participant-generated narratives will offer a more nuanced examination of romantic and sexual identity construction than previous studies

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of online dating ads, which made use of information participants selected from a list of available options on the dating website.

1.1. Content analyses of personal and preferred partner characteristics

Content analyses of personal ads typically examine profile characteristics selected from predetermined lists and then compare these characteristics based on the participants' gender or sexual orientation. Regarding gender differences in heterosexual adults' ads, past research has found that men's personal profiles are more likely to offer physical descriptors, expressive qualities, and career, education, and financial status while women more often offer physical attractiveness and instrumental qualities (Cicerello & Sheehan, 1995; Koestner & Wheeler, 1988). Regarding preferred partner characteristics, men are more likely to request an attractive, shorter, younger partner with expressive qualities, while women often request taller, older partners with more advanced career and educational status (Bolig, Stein, & McKenry, 1984; Cicerello & Sheehan, 1995; Jagger, 2005; Kenrick, Keefe, Bryan, Barr, & Brown, 1995; Koestner & Wheeler, 1988; Matthews, 1999; Rajecki, Bledsoe, & Rasmussen, 1991). Koestner and Wheeler (1988) also found that men were more likely to mention their height and request weight from potential partners, while women were more likely to mention their weight and request height in return. Overall, Jagger (2001) found that men held somewhat more varied presentations of self in personal ads than did women, whose profiles primary features included physical attractiveness and sexuality.

Research has also emphasized self-presentation differences based on sexual orientation, offering examinations of gay men and women's ads along with comparisons to their heterosexual counterparts. Gonzalez and Meyers (1993) found that, overall, heterosexuals were more likely to pursue long-term relationships and mention personal sincerity and financial security in print ads while homosexuals were more likely to emphasize personal and preferred physical characteristics and sexuality. Most of this research has shown that gender and sexual orientation interact to produce differences in personal and preferred partner characteristics outlined in the advertisements. For example, Child, Low, McCormick, and Cociarella (1996) found that homosexual men mentioned sexuality and physical characteristics more often while heterosexual men offered financial security and occupational status. Heterosexual women also tend to provide and request physical descriptors more than lesbians (Gonzalez & Meyers, 1993; Smith & Stillman, 2002). Additionally, when comparing homosexual men and women's ads, men more often emphasize sexual and physical attractiveness while women emphasize emotional and personality characteristics (Hatala & Prehodka, 1996; Thorne & Coupland, 1998).

Several other studies have explored demographic differences in personal and preferred partner characteristics other than gender and sexual orientation. For example, a content analysis of older adults' advertisements revealed an emphasis on nonsexual relational goals and few references to age (Coupland, 2000). In addition, Jagger (2005) found that younger men and older women were the most likely to advertise and that men were more likely to mention their age in ads than women. Few studies to date have examined differences in preferences based on the types of relationship requested. Buunk, Dijkstra, Fetchenhauer, and Kenrick (2002) found that individuals who were interested in a lower level of involvement (i.e., casual sex, sexual fantasies) preferred partners who were more physically attractive and were less concerned with education levels. As involvement levels increased (i.e., serious relationship, marriage) individuals preferred partners with higher self confidence.

In summary, content analyses have established patterns based on gender and sexual orientation regarding a limited number of

characteristics present in personal ads, along with a handful of other demographic characteristics. Because much of this research was conducted with print ads and was limited in the characteristics examined, the first goal of this study is to extend this body of research by assessing a broader array of personally-narrated characteristics based on demographic factors and desired relationship type.

1.2. Comparing personal and preferred partner characteristics

In addition to exploring contemporary romantic and sexual identities and preferred partner characteristics in young adults' online personal ads, the present study explores how often the personal characteristics described in online ads are mirrored in preferred partner narratives. The role of similarity in romantic relationships has been well-established through research on assortive mating and the matching phenomenon/hypothesis. Overall, research indicates that similarity is much more common in romantic relationships than complementarity (e.g., holding different or opposite characteristics), though stronger similarity was found in age, religiousness, and education, and weaker associations were found regarding personality (Watson et al., 2004). Several researchers have explored this phenomenon as it relates to dating advertisements, findings that people seek an equivalent exchange by offering and requesting matching credentials in their personal ads (Harrison & Saeed, 1977; Miller, Smith, & Trembath, 2000; Rowat, Cunningham, & Druen, 1999). For example, Harrison and Saeed (1977) discovered that people sought partners with similar levels of social desirability and attractiveness as themselves. In a study reviewing body size requests in personal advertisements, Miller et al. (2000) found that heavier women were less stringent of prospective partners' weight. Research also shows that individual posting personal ads may attempt to become more attractive to potential partners by matching their physical features and personality type to their prospective partners' physical features and personality type (Rowat et al., 1999).

As outlined above, analyses of dating advertisements often reveal patterns of offered and requested characteristics that vary based on the individuals' gender (e.g., Koestner & Wheeler, 1988). Frequently conducted with heterosexual individuals, analyses of dating ads suggest a divergence in which characteristics are most important for male partners (e.g., status) and female partners (e.g., attractiveness). However, in another study, Cicerello and Sheehan (1995) found that men typically offered traditionally feminine emotion-based traits while women typically offered traditionally masculine traits in dating profiles. These findings can be interpreted as supporting the matching hypothesis because male and female profilers might have assumed a proper relational exchange was only feasible when the characteristics they desired in potential mates were also personally required characteristics.

In summary, while general research on romantic relationships indicates that similarity wins out over difference, little is known about whether the characteristics individuals present and request in dating advertisements tend to converge or diverge. Furthermore, while research generally finds that heterosexual men and women tend to offer and request complementary gender-based characteristics in dating advertisements, contemporary within-subject examinations with both heterosexual and sexual minority individuals are lacking.

1.3. The present study

The goals of the present study were to examine the personal characteristics and preferred partner characteristics outlined in online dating advertisement narratives by young adults in the United States. The first goal was to assess the frequency with which

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