

# Mate Selection Patterns of Men and Women in Personal Advertisements: New Bottle, Old Wine

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## ABSTRACT

Between 1975 and 1988, 2,091 advertisements in a metropolitan newspaper were analyzed. There was a six-fold overall increase in the number of ads. Female and male advertisers substantially differed, both in terms of frequencies and the bargaining tools they utilized. The criteria utilized by men and women in selecting their mates, especially in terms of age and attractiveness, showed a continued reliance on traditional patterns. It was concluded that the rules of mate selection remain traditional and favour males and the young. There is also some reason to believe that male advertisers have learned to tailor their revelations according to what they think women want. Both qualitative and quantitative studies of such trends are suggested.

## RÉSUMÉ

Après avoir analysé 2091 annonces parues dans un journal métropolitain entre 1975 et 1988, on a pu constater une augmentation globale de 600 pour cent dans le nombre d'annonces. On a d'ailleurs remarqué une différence considérable entre les annonceuses et les annonceurs en ce qui a trait à la fréquence et aux techniques de vente. Les critères utilisés par les hommes et les femmes pour choisir leur partenaire, surtout par rapport à l'âge et aux attraits, montrent qu'on continue à se fier aux modèles traditionnels. On a conclu que les règles suivies pour choisir un ou une partenaire demeurent traditionnelles et favorisent les hommes et les jeunes. Il existe aussi des raisons de croire que les annonceurs hommes ont appris à adapter leurs révélations à ce que les femmes, à leur avis, veulent. Des études qualitatives et quantitatives de telles tendances sont suggérées.

Although there is a substantial research on gender-based mate selection processes through personal ads, most provide a snapshot of the market (Baker, 1982; Cameron, Oskamp & Sparks, 1977; Deaux & Hanna, 1984; Gelder, 1984; Green & Heuer, 1984; Harrison & Saeed, 1977; Lynn & Shurgot, 1984; Mullan, 1984; Sitton & Rippee, 1986). Moreover, differential methodologies used and varying sources of the analyzed ads also make comparisons difficult. Under these conditions, whether men's and women's mate choices are moving toward more egalitarian forms or remain static is not clear. It is thus the purpose of this study to provide a longitudinal analysis of personal ads

published in a major metropolitan newspaper during 1975, 1980, 1985 and 1988.

Personal ads are not a new phenomenon, since such ads have often provided a forum for individuals with restrictions or specifications that were not met in traditional pools. For example, periodicals such as *The Advocate* have served gays (Lee, 1978a). Mullan (1984) mentions other outlets for Jewish or Oriental clientele. What is new is that the personal ads have moved from specialized magazines and periodicals to daily newspapers with large readerships. The reasons for the shift are given as rising divorce rates, greater

geographic mobility, loneliness, and isolation in urban centres (Baker, 1982). In addition, personal ads require very little investment and a relatively risk-free selection from a variety of eligibles. In Lee's (1978a:165) terms, they provide "home delivery."

A parallel development since the 1970s has been an increased emphasis on rights and freedoms of women in North America (Bernard, 1975; Wilson, 1986). In addition, the advent of the Pill as a highly effective method of birth control has made reproductive control for women a reality for the first time in history (McDonnell, 1984). Simultaneously, the labour force participation of women has gone through a dramatic increase, placing more than half of the North American women in paid labour (Bureau of the Census, 1988; Statistics Canada, Labour Force, 1988). Rates of marital breakdown closely parallel the mentioned changes. Currently, one third of marriages in Canada and one half of the marriages in the United States are expected to end in divorce (Glick, 1986; Statistics Canada, Vital Statistics, 1986). Whether these changes have affected the mate selection patterns of men and women over the years will be traced through the companion ads in a metropolitan newspaper.

### Review of the Literature

Research on personal ads show that men and women use different bargaining tools in presenting themselves, or filtering eligibles from non eligibles. Some of the differentially used characteristics are age and social class. Moreover, revealed commitment to relationships and proclaimed physical attractiveness are also found to be gender linked (Deaux & Hanna, 1984).

#### Age

Marriage statistics show that brides are two to three years younger than their mates at their first marriage (Statistics Canada, Vital Statistics, 1986; Buss & Barnes, 1986). Couples that are formed in later life have a more exaggerated age difference, since older men have a tendency to choose much younger mates (Goode, 1982; Harrison & Saeed, 1977). Green and Heuer (1984:507) found an identical pattern in personal ads. They claim that "age is one of the earliest and most powerful variables attended in the process of choosing."

#### Social class

Whether it is conceptualized as occupation or income, social class affects values, attitudes and behaviour more than any other structural determinant (Buss & Barnes, 1986; Morgan, 1981). Society perpetuates the status quo by providing different opportunities for different classes from which to choose their mates (Porter, 1974). However, there is a slight but consistent tendency for males to marry downward and females to marry upward in terms of socio-economic status, a pattern which has also been observed in personal ads (Cameron, Oskamp & Sparks, 1977; Deaux & Hanna, 1984; Green & Heuer, 1984; Harrison & Saeed, 1977; Sitton & Rippee, 1986).

#### Revealed commitment

One of the observations in the dating patterns of men and women is that women want permanency while men are quite satisfied with short-term relations. Many studies have found identical patterns in newspaper ads (Baker, 1982; Deaux & Hanna, 1984; Sitton & Rippee, 1986).

#### Proclaimed attractiveness

Usually, people become involved with partners who are as good-looking as themselves (Berscheid et al., 1971). On the other hand, attractiveness of women has been historically exchanged for wealth and social standing that men provide. In newspaper ads, bartering of looks for security is undertaken mostly by women (Cameron, Oskamp & Sparks, 1977; Green & Heuer, 1984; Harrison & Saeed, 1977).

### The Present Study

The present study is a longitudinal analysis of person ads that appeared in *The Toronto Star* during 1975, 1980, 1985 and 1988. The goal is to study systematically the penetration as well as the bargaining strategies men and women utilized. A longitudinal approach will also allow to detect changes (or a lack of change) in these strategies over time.

Due to factors such as isolation in urban centres, geographic mobility, women's increased participation in the labour force and increased divorce rates (Baker, 1982), a considerable rise in the number of ads and a change in the sex composition of the advertisers (more

women) are expected. Moreover, if the rising awareness of women has generalized to intimate relations between men and women, we predict that female and male advertisers will slowly become similar in the bargaining tools and strategies they use. Under the stated circumstance, fewer women will depend on the socio-economic status of the male partner and/or utilize attractiveness as a bargaining strategy. The mirror image of this expectation is a decrease in males who offer financial security but an increase in the number of men who mention physical attractiveness. However, if equality issues have not generalized to intimate relationships between men and women, women will still bargain with relative youth and attractiveness, while men will offer financial security and require beauty. In sum, the present study tests for changes (or lack of change) toward more egalitarian bargaining strategies between men and women.

### Methods

#### Sample

Two thousand ninety-one personal ads from the "companions" column of *The Toronto Star* were analyzed. This number constituted the total number of ads that appeared during the first seven days of July in 1975, 1980, 1985 and 1988.<sup>1</sup> *The Toronto Star* was selected as an urban, middle-class Canadian newspaper with a wide readership. In addition, one of the most detailed analyses about male/female comparisons in personal ads (Baker, 1982) has also utilized a sample from the same newspaper.

#### Procedure

Each ad was coded for the year in which it appeared, as well as sex, age, and occupation of the advertisers. If mentioned, the same variables were recorded for the sought partner. When an age range was given, the mid-point of the range was recorded. Occupation was used as an index of socio-economic status. Professional, white collar, blue collar and unemployed formed the four levels.<sup>2</sup>

The two levels of commitment were roughly derived from Lee's (1978b) conceptualization of "storgay" versus a combination of "ludus" and "pragma" love styles. The first subsumed "sincerity," "marriage-mindedness," "close companionship," "long-term commitment," "honesty" and related revelations.

Those ads which emphasized "excitement," "play," "travel," "dancing," "participation in sports," "dining," "someone to take care of the kids" and other playful and/or pragmatic revelations formed the second category.

References to attractiveness were coded as a dichotomous variable. Attractiveness was operationalized as any adjective that directly referred to the "good looks" of the advertiser, but not factual information about height, weight or hair or eye colour. For example, "blue eyes" was not considered as reference to one's attractiveness whereas "dazzling blue eyes" was.

All coding was done by a single researcher and double checked by another. There were no disagreements on the sex, age, or occupation variables. Rare coding errors were found and corrected. When disagreements occurred on the type of relationship or attractiveness items (less than 5 percent of all coding), the ads were recoded. If an agreement was still not reached, the variables were assigned missing values. Thus the following analyses are based upon only those ads which attained one hundred percent inter-observer reliability.

### Results

#### Overall frequencies

In the first week of July 1988, there were 793 ads placed in *The Toronto Star*. The number of ads for the corresponding periods of 1985, 1980 and 1975 were 646, 523 and 129 respectively.<sup>3</sup> The total number of ads was 2,091. Therefore, from 1975 to 1988, there is slightly more than a six-fold increase in the total number.

#### Sex distribution

Overall, there were 1,620 males and 404 females as well as 67 dyads/triads seeking companions during the period of the study. However, the present focus is on males and females who were seeking *opposite sex* partners. There were 1,429 males looking for females (type=MF) and 371 females seeking males (type=FM), for a total of 1,800 ads.

The breakdown of the 1,800 ads by time period is as follows: In 1988, there were 148 females (21%) and

567 males (79%) in the market. For 1985, corresponding figures were 115 (22%) and 407 (78%). In 1980 and 1975, respectively, 75 (17%) and 33 (27%) females sought male companions. There were 367 (83%) and 88 (73%) male advertisers for the respective years. These data show that newspaper companion advertisements are mostly utilized by men. At each of the periods, women formed *approximately a quarter* of the opposite-sex mate seekers. Although the actual number of female advertisers has risen (from 33 in 1975 to 148 in 1988), the percentage of female advertisers has actually declined over the period of study (from 27% in 1975 to 21% in 1988,  $X^2=7.51$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p<.05$ ).

*Age distribution*

Of the 1,800 opposite mate seekers, 1,300 (72%) mentioned their own age. The mean was 36.3 years (35.9 for men and 37.9 for women). Men were more likely to mention their age (254=69% of women and 1,046=73% of men). A two-factor analysis of variance (2x2) using the four time periods of the study and type of advertisers (MF versus FM) showed significant main effects for type ( $F_{(1,1292)}=11.07$ ,  $p=.001$ ). Females were significantly older. In addition, there was a type by time period interaction ( $F_{(3,1292)}=2.86$ ,  $p=.036$ ), which showed that female advertisers were significantly older than male advertisers, with the exception of 1980. That year, the mean ages were identical (35.7).

Table 1 depicts the sought partner's age categories by type and year. In 1975, no advertiser specified an age range for the partner; therefore, the analysis excludes that year. As clearly seen from the remaining three time periods, females were looking for older men, while males "required" younger women ( $G^2=471.48$ ,  $df=12$ ,  $p<.001$ ).<sup>4</sup>

*Occupation*

Over the period of study, 443 (25%) advertisers made a reference to their occupation. A vast majority (415=94%) claimed that they were either "professionals" or held white collar jobs. Only twenty-nine advertisers mentioned "blue collar" jobs. The breakdown of these figures according to type of advertisers was not significant ( $p>.20$ ).

**TABLE 1**  
Age of the Sought Partner by Type and Year

| Year  | Age   | Types of Advertisers |     |       | Marginal |
|-------|-------|----------------------|-----|-------|----------|
|       |       | M/F                  | F/M | Total |          |
| 1980  | <30   | 89                   | 4   | 93    | 164      |
|       | 31-45 | 29                   | 11  | 40    |          |
|       | 46<   | 6                    | 25  | 31    |          |
| 1985  | <30   | 104                  | 3   | 107   | 247      |
|       | 31-45 | 69                   | 46  | 115   |          |
|       | 46<   | 6                    | 19  | 25    |          |
| 1988  | <30   | 133                  | 1   | 134   | 335      |
|       | 31-45 | 104                  | 41  | 145   |          |
|       | 46<   | 8                    | 48  | 56    |          |
| TOTAL |       | 548                  | 198 | 746   |          |

$G^2=471.48$ ,  $df=12$ ,  $p=.001$

**TABLE 2**  
Proclaimed Commitment by Year

| Year  | Types of Proclaimed Commitment |                   | Total |
|-------|--------------------------------|-------------------|-------|
|       | Companionship                  | Playful/Pragmatic |       |
| 1975  | 6                              | 84                | 90    |
| 1980  | 161                            | 165               | 326   |
| 1985  | 203                            | 205               | 408   |
| 1988  | 386                            | 164               | 550   |
| TOTAL | 756                            | 618               | 1374  |

$X^2=144.87$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p<.001$

TABLE 3  
Reference to Attractiveness by Year

| Year  | No   | Yes | Total |
|-------|------|-----|-------|
| 1975  | 91   | 30  | 121   |
| 1980  | 266  | 176 | 442   |
| 1985  | 279  | 243 | 522   |
| 1988  | 399  | 316 | 715   |
| TOTAL | 1035 | 765 | 1800  |

$$X^2=21.17, df=3, p<.001$$

#### Revelations of commitment

A total of 1,374 (76%) advertisers made a reference to their commitment. Table 2 shows these revelations by time periods. What is interesting in these frequencies is the significant rise in sincere/companionship types of ads in relation to a sharp decline in pragmatic/playful searches ( $X^2=144.87, df=3, p<.001$ ). Additional analyses indicated that men were the creators of the observed rise. Overall, 625 (57%) of male advertisers claimed some sort of sincerity in contrast to 131 (49%) of women ( $X^2=5.09, df=1, p<.024$ ). In the present study, the *male* advertisers appear to be more interested in "commitment," which contradicts earlier findings. We will have occasion to come back to these results.

#### Revelations of attractiveness

Over the four time periods, 765 (43%) advertisers made a reference to their own attractiveness. Moreover, as Table 3 shows, there was, over the years, a steady and significant increase of those who mentioned their attractiveness ( $X^2=21.17, df=3, p<.001$ ). This increase in attributions to attractiveness was equally true for women and men. However, significantly more females advertisers than men (64% versus 37%) presented themselves as attractive and, in spite of the overall rise of self attributions of *both sexes*, female/male differences robustly persist ( $X^2=84.15, df=1, p<.001$ ).

## Discussion

The results of the present study provide some unprecedented insights into an unconventional mate market over one and a half decades. The number of companion seekers from 1975 to 1988 showed slightly more than a six-fold increase. These findings support Baker's (1982) contention that there is an increased willingness to try new avenues in mate selection which is reflective of changing patterns of coupling in North America.

In terms of advertisers seeking opposite-sex mates, females consistently formed one quarter of the market. The male/female ratio is not surprising since Baker (1982) also made similar observations. What is noteworthy is the total stagnation across time. Females who are looking for males still seem to be reluctant to enter this unconventional market. Since 1975, they have increased their participation only 4.48 times, whereas their male counterparts have placed 6.44 times as many ads in 1988 as they did in 1975.

A possible explanation for the lower levels of women's presence as ad givers and a lack of change in that dimension may be found in their gender-role socialization. As Breton's (1984) review of the historical development of mate markets shows, such markets have functioned within the continuum of "choosers" and the "chosen." Historically, women have been confined to the chosen role, with the exception of older women who were given the task of choosing for third parties (such as match-makers). It is possible that these entrenched patterns may still be at work in subtle forms, since women seem to be much less active as the authors of the advertisements. However, large numbers of women may still be passively present in the world of companion ads as "consumers" of the advertisements. After all, passive participation is more congruent with the roles delegated to women, even in matters which have direct consequences for their own lives. An actual test of the suggested dichotomies await future investigations.

In the present observations, age was a frequently mentioned characteristic. Overall, women were slightly less likely to mention their age. Those who did were significantly older than men who mentioned their age. Traditional choice patterns such as females seeking older men and men seeking younger women were visible (Table 1). If advertisers are also potential

"consumers" of other peoples' ads, female advertisers are severely disadvantaged in this market. As long as the traditional norm about "younger woman" prevails, most of these older women are bound to remain without mates in spite of their willingness to settle for men who are their senior. Simply, there are not many such males. Of course, the mirror image of the dilemma also applies to younger men who are competing for younger women with older men. In terms of probabilities, the best bet for women in general and older women in particular is to seek younger men. This alternative, however, requires that women start bargaining on assets other than youth and beauty. The present analyses fail to show a development. According to the current results, female advertisers are still bargaining with traditional tools such as "relative" youth and/or attractiveness even in this unconventional market. Moreover, in spite of the significant rise in proclamations of attractiveness by both sexes over the years, the differences between men and women have not changed at all.

In addition, there were qualitative differences between the self-presentation of females and males. Although the pre-determined quantitative coding scheme was not sensitive to qualitative differences, we could not help but notice that, while male advertisers contended with words such as "good looking," "handsome," and "presentable," female advertisers were more likely to use adjectives such as "vivacious," "delicious," "luscious," "gorgeous," "stunning," and "devilishly dazzling."

In the present study, although 25 percent of advertisers made a reference to their occupation, male/female differences were not observed. Future research should employ other conceptualizations of socio-economic status. For example, after the fact, we realized that the most frequently utilized indicator of status was not occupation per se, but in terms of consumption. Comments such as "have new car," "own home," "just got a boat," and "have a cottage" were frequent.

The last inquiry was about the proclaimed sincerity of the advertisers. Over time, it was observed that more people in search of companionship and sincerity in relationships have entered the newspaper ads market. What is intriguing is that men — significantly more so than women — made this revelation. This is indeed an unexpected finding, especially in light of the fact that men have not put aside other traditional requirements, such as a desire for younger women. Neither have

women set aside their traditional bargaining tools, such as utilizing their attractiveness or offering relative youth. What, then, can explain men's apparent search for commitment, which is a characteristic repeatedly associated with women? Although we cannot provide a robust answer at this point, and we recommend future studies to examine more closely this pattern, one explanation that comes to mind is that "men have learned to play the game in the way women want" (see Koestner & Wheeler [1988] who arrive at a similar conclusion). One of the advertisers inadvertently led us to this conclusion. In 1975, we came across a male advertiser who appeared to be seeking long-term commitment. Because of the unique wording of his "plea," we were able to identify the ad when it reappeared in 1980, and again in 1985. The ad giver had not changed a single word or punctuation in his ad through the years, appearing as sincere as when we first encountered him in 1975.

### Summary and Conclusions

The present observations are congruent with observations from other studies that have explored mate markets in general (Buss & Barnes, 1986; Byrne & Lambert, 1970; Kennedy, 1976) and the world of personal ads (Baker, 1982; Green et al., 1984; Lynn & Shurgot, 1984; Mullan, 1984; Harrison & Saeed, 1977). The unique contribution of the present study, however, is in terms of showing an entrenched difference between men and women in the mate selection process, as well as documenting a serious stagnation across time. Advertisers of both sexes seem to be oblivious to the raising awareness in terms of gender equity and equality. Even in this so-called modern market, the rules of the game for women seem unchanged, that is, that women must remain, preferably, as "stunning" as possible.

The sample studied has definite shortcomings which limit the generalizability of the results. First, authors of personal ads might differ substantially from other mate seekers. For example, they are older. They might also be more inclined toward casual, recreational types of relationships rather than long-term commitment. However, the current results provide evidence that this pattern is changing, especially in men's revelations. Secondly, *The Toronto Star* might not be a representative paper just like Toronto might not be representative of all urban centres. With due recognition of these difficulties, however, it is our contention that the observed patterns overlap substantially with results from other sources. As

Harrison and Saeed (1977), we recommend additional systematic studies of personal ads, since these ads contain a wealth of information about across-time patterns. Qualitative analyses of such ads might also be useful, since quantification oversimplifies the differences between self-presentations of men and women.

As far as the current observations are concerned, we conclude that, even in this unconventional market, the rules of the mating game have remained extremely traditional. Women (especially older women) are at a disadvantage, both as choosers and as potential chosen. The personal ads market seems to be a traditional market in disguise, a new bottle for the same old wine.

## NOTES

1. As an anonymous reviewer of an earlier version of this paper pointed out, utilizing a composite week would have been more methodologically sound than the continuous week (first week of July) that was utilized in the current study. The source of this oversight is due to the fact that the present research was first conceptualized as a teaching tool, which was then turned into a longitudinal study. We acknowledge the unfortunate implications on the generalizability of the current observations to the totality of ad givers (let alone the totality of mate seekers in general). However, the large number of observations in the data base, coupled with the fact the similarity of the current results to a number of cross-sectional studies reported in the literature, lead us to believe that the mentioned restriction might not be as detrimental to generalizability as it might first seem.
2. The differentiation between occupational categories is based upon Blishen's (1958) occupational prestige scale.
3. In 1975, *The Toronto Star* was not published on Sundays. Since the duration of the observations is a week, we chose against deleting the Sunday ads from the following years.
4. SPSS-X calculates the degrees of freedom of a loglinear analysis as the number of non-zero cells minus the number of parameters estimated.

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