“Where Have All the Good Men Gone?”
Gender and Online Dating

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Online dating platforms reduce many of the social and geographic barriers that exist in traditional dating settings, such as schools, work, neighborhoods, etc. In this study, we examined whether gender norms and preferences for more “socially desirable partners” benefit men and create a dating disadvantage for women in the earliest stages of dating. We tested this idea with six months of online dating data from a mid-sized southwestern city in the United States (8259 men and 6274 women). We found that both men and women tend to send messages to mating candidates who possess the most socially desirable socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., age, height, education, race, etc.) regardless of their own social desirability. We also found that men and women who make first contact connect with equally or more desirable partners than those who wait to be contacted. However, women are four times less likely to send messages than men. Finally, our findings suggested that socioeconomic similarities in longer-term unions result, in part, from relationship termination (i.e., non-reciprocity) rather than initial preferences for similar partners.

Why Is Online Dating an Important Subject for Family Researchers to Study?

Over the past two decades, the stigma associated with online dating has largely disappeared, making online dating not only acceptable but even a preferred mate-selection strategy.

Did You Know?

A recent nationally representative survey (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012) found that more than 20% of heterosexual adults and 60% of same-sex couples who started their relationship since 2005 met online.

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The increased prevalence of online dating is unlikely to recede anytime soon as younger generations have spent most of their lives fashioning identities through similar social media platforms (e.g., Facebook and Twitter). As traditional ways of meeting partners (e.g., church, school, family, and neighborhood) decline, online dating is becoming increasingly attractive as a way for singles to connect.

Online dating also tears down many of the social and geographic barriers common in traditional dating settings. For example, in schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods, daters are only likely to meet potential partners of similar socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., economic status, race, and education), so unions formed in these contexts tend to magnify existing group inequalities. Most online dating sites do not restrict their membership to any particular social group, which reduces many of the structural obstacles daters face offline. This is particularly true for marginalized or small populations (e.g., gay men and lesbians) that may have difficulty finding available partners in offline dating venues.

Finally, online dating data provide a window into the hard-to-measure contexts of partner searches, first contact, and initial impressions. Data from online dating websites provide opportunities for researchers to analyze large numbers of interactions that are difficult to capture in offline settings.

In sum, online dating provides exciting and important insights into current and future coupling and marital trends.

**Summary of Study Findings**

**What characteristics do people seek in a desirable partner?** Average peer ratings from our sample revealed that being white, athletic or thin, tall, well educated, a drinker, and a non-smoker are desirable characteristics for sampled male and female online daters.

However, strong gender differences exist:

- **Age:** Men prefer younger women, whereas women prefer older men.
- **Height:** Women prefer taller men, whereas men do not show a strong preference for women’s height.
- **Race:** Black women are preferred less than black men by their online dating counterparts.
- **Education:** Men rate women with post-graduate degrees as less attractive than women rate men with similar education.
- **Mode of selection:** Men prefer photos, whereas women seek longer written profiles.

These findings suggest a gendered preference for looks over written communication skills, advanced education, and cultural interests.

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While revealing little about long-term relationship outcomes (e.g., marriage), online dating data provide rich information about patterns and dynamics of early relationship formation.

**Why Has There Been So Little Research on Online Dating?**

1. Most online dating websites are run by business entities that have few incentives to make their data available to academics (particularly when research may demonstrate weaknesses of the dating website).

2. Family scholars are skeptical of online dating research because it is impossible to measure certain long-term outcomes, such as marriage or inter-partner dynamics, through online dating.

3. Online dating is a relatively new phenomenon. It takes time for research and theory to catch up with sudden social change.
Gender and Online Interactions

As with prior research, we found that heterosexual male online daters 1) are much more likely to send first contact messages than women (by a four-to-one ratio) and 2) tend to send messages to more socially desirable (measured through average peer ratings) partners than themselves. The result of these patterns is that the majority of first contact messaging in heterosexual online dating platforms originates from men and goes to a relatively small number of highly desirable women.

More than men, women typically wait to be contacted before reciprocating messages to potential partners. Combined with male patterns of vertical messaging, female passivity results in many women having to choose partners from a less desirable suitor pool. This could leave many women wondering, “Where have all the good men gone?” Interestingly, however, when women do send first contact messages, they are just as likely as men to send messages to more desirable partners.

Is There an Initiator Advantage?

By comparing the desirability ratings of senders and receivers over repeated exchanges, our findings suggest that an active mate-searching strategy increases the probability of connecting with a more desirable partner than a passive strategy. This is because even though the majority of messages to persons of the opposite sex will result in non-response, the possibility remains for “less desirable” daters to have sustained connections with more attractive partners. This potential is much smaller for passive daters of either gender. Moreover, because men are far more likely to send contact initiation messages than women, they are more likely to benefit from the initiator advantage.

Conclusion

Contrary to observed similarities among married couples, male and female online daters—at all levels of desirability—primarily seek out the most desirable daters as potential partners. Along with these vertical preferences, we also found evidence of an initiator advantage in online dating exchanges. Those who initiate contact are more likely to pair off with a more desirable partner than those who wait to be asked. Interestingly, the fewer women who initiate contact were more likely to connect with a partner than male initiators and the quality of their partners was equal to those of women who connected with a passive strategy. An important implication of these findings is that women should not be discouraged from sending messages if they want to connect with attractive partners. Finally, we found evidence that partner similarities increase with each reciprocated exchange. Individuals may begin their search by seeking out that “one in a million” partner, but surviving couples tend to be more similar in their levels of social desirability than those who break apart.

References
