

Men as Success Objects and Women as Sex Objects: A Study of Personal Advertisements

Simon Davis¹

Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

A study was made of 328 personal advertisements sampled from a major daily Canadian newspaper. It was found that gender differences for desired companion attributes were consistent with traditional sex role stereotypes. Relative to the opposite sex, women emphasized employment, financial, and intellectual status, as well as commitment, while men emphasized physical characteristics. Physical characteristics were the most desired, regardless of sex. Secondary findings were that, for this sample, considerably more men than women placed ads, and that the mean age for both sexes was relatively high. The main findings were similar to those from earlier studies.

Previous research has indicated that, to a large extent, selection of opposite-sex partners is dictated by traditional sex stereotypes (Urberg, 1979). More specifically, it has been found that men tend to emphasize sexuality and physical attractiveness in a mate to a greater extent than women (e.g., Harrison & Saeed, 1977; Deaux & Hanna, 1984; Nevid, 1984); this distinction has been found across cultures, as in the study by Stiles and colleagues (1987) of American and Icelandic adolescents.

The relatively greater preoccupation with casual sexual encounters demonstrated by men (Hite, 1987, p. 184) may be accounted for by the greater emotional investment that women place in sex; Basow (1986, p. 80) suggests that the "gender differences in this area (different meaning attached to sex) may turn out to be the strongest of all gender differences."

¹The author was formerly a psychiatric social worker employed by the Greater Vancouver Mental Health Service in Vancouver, B.C., Canada. He is presently a doctoral candidate at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. The author would like to thank Dr. Ted Palys for his comments.

Women, conversely, may tend to emphasize psychological and personality characteristics (Curry & Hock, 1981; Deaux & Hanna, 1984), and to seek longevity and commitment in a relationship to a greater extent (Basow, 1986, p. 213).

Women may also seek financial security more so than men (Harrison & Saeed, 1977). Regarding this last point, Farrell (1986, p. 25) suggests that the tendency to treat men as success objects is reflected in the media, particularly in advertisements in women's magazines. On the other hand, men themselves may reinforce this stereotype in that a number of men still apparently prefer the traditional marriage with working husband and unemployed wife (Basow, 1986, p. 210).

Men have traditionally been more dominant in intellectual matters, and this may be reinforced in the courting process: Braito (1981) found in his study that female coeds feigned intellectual inferiority with their dates on a number of occasions. In the same vein, Hite, in her 1981 survey, found that men were less likely to seek intellectual prowess in their mate (p. 108).

The mate selection process has been characterized in at least two ways. Harrison and Saeed (1977) found evidence for a matching process, where individuals seeking particular characteristics in a partner were more likely to offer those characteristics in themselves. This is consistent with the observation that "like attracts like" and that husbands and wives tend to resemble one another in various ways (Thiessen & Gregg, 1980). Additionally, an exchange process may be in operation, wherein a trade-off is made with women offering "domestic work and sex for financial support" (Basow, 1986, p. 213).

With respect to sex stereotypes and mate selection, the trend has been for "both sexes to believe that the other sex expects them to live up to the gender stereotype" (Basow, 1986, p. 209).

Theoretical explanations of sex stereotypes in mate selection range from the sociobiological (Symons, 1987) to radical political views (Smith, 1973). Of interest in recent years has been demographic influences, that is, the lesser availability of men because of population shifts and marital patterns (Shaevitz, 1987, p. 40). Age may differentially affect women, particularly when children are desired; this, combined with women's generally lower economic status [particularly when unmarried (Halas, 1981, p. 124)], may mean that the need to "settle down" into a secure, committed relationship becomes relatively more crucial for women.

The present study looks at differential mate selection by men and women as reflected in newspaper companion ads. Using such a forum for the exploration of sex stereotypes is not new; for instance, in the study by Harrison and Saeed (1977) cited earlier, the authors found that in such ads women were more likely to seek financial security and men to seek attractiveness;

a later study by Deaux and Hanna (1984) had similar results, along with the finding that women were more likely to seek psychological characteristics, specific personality traits, and to emphasize the quality and longevity of the relationship. The present study may be seen as a follow-up of this earlier research, although on this occasion using a Canadian setting. Of particular interest was the following: Were traditional stereotypes still in operation, that is, women being viewed as sex objects and men as success objects (the latter defined as financial and intellectual accomplishments)?

METHOD

Personal advertisements were taken from the *Vancouver Sun*, which is the major daily newspaper serving Vancouver, British Columbia. The *Sun* is generally perceived as a conservative, respectable journal—hence it was assumed that people advertising in it represented the “mainstream.” It should be noted that people placing the ads must do so in person. For the sake of this study, gay ads were not included. A typical ad would run about 50 words, and included a brief description of the person placing it and a list of the attributes desired in the other party. Only the parts pertaining to the attributes desired in the partner were included for analysis. Attributes that pertained to hobbies or recreations were not included for the purpose of this study.

The ads were sampled as follows: Only Saturday ads were used, since in the *Sun* the convention was for Saturday to be the main day for personal ads, with 40–60 ads per edition—compared to only 2–4 ads per edition on weekdays. Within any one edition *all* the ads were included for analysis. Six editions were randomly sampled, covering the period of September 30, 1988, to September 30, 1989. The attempt to sample through the calendar year was made in an effort to avoid any unspecified seasonal effect. The size of the sample (six editions) was large enough to meet goodness-of-fit requirements for statistical tests.

The attributes listed in the ads were coded as follows:

1. *Attractive*: specified that a partner should be, for example, “pretty” or “handsome.”
2. *Physique*: similar to 1; however, this focused not on the face but rather on whether the partner was “fit and trim,” “muscular,” or had “a good figure.” If it was not clear if body or face was being emphasized, this fell into variable (1) by default.
3. *Sex*: specified that the partner should have, for instance, “high sex drive,” or should be “sensuous” or “erotic,” or if there was a clear message that this was an arrangement for sexual purposes (“lunch-time liaisons—discretion required”).

4. *Picture*: specified that the partner should include a photo in his/her reply.
5. *Profession*: specified that the partner should be a professional.
6. *Employed*: specified that the partner should be employed, e.g., "must hold steady job" or "must have steady income."
7. *Financial*: specified that the partner should be, for instance, "financially secure" or "financially independent."
8. *Education*: specified that the partner should be, for instance, "well educated" or "well read," or should be a "college grad."
9. *Intelligence*: specified that the partner should be "intelligent," "intellectual," or "bright."
10. *Honest*: specified, for instance, that the partner should be "honest" or have "integrity."
11. *Humor*: specified "sense of humor" or "cheerfulness."
12. *Commitment*: specified that the relationship was to be "long term" or "lead to marriage," or some other indication of stability and longevity.
13. *Emotion*: specified that the partner should be "warm," "romantic," "emotionally supportive," "emotionally expressive," "sensitive," "loving," "responsive," or similar terms indicating an opposition to being cold and aloof.

In addition to the 13 attribute variables, two other pieces of information were collected: The length of the ad (in lines) and the age of the person placing the ad. Only if age was exactly specified was it included; if age was vague (e.g., "late 40s") this was not counted.

Variables were measured in the following way: Any ad requesting one of the 13 attributes was scored once for that attribute. If not explicitly mentioned, it was not scored. The scoring was thus "all or nothing," e.g., no matter how many times a person in a particular ad stressed that looks were important it was only counted as a single score in the "attractive" column; thus, each single score represented one person. Conceivably, an individual ad could mention all, some, or none of the variables. Comparisons were then made between the sexes on the basis of the variables, using percentages and chi-squares. Chi-square values were derived by cross-tabulating gender (male/female) with attribute (asked for/not asked for). Degrees of freedom in all cases equaled one. Finally, several of the individual variables were collapsed to get an overall sense of the relative importance of (a) physical factors, (b) employment factors, and (c) intellectual factors.

RESULTS

A total of 329 personal ads were contained in the six newspaper editions studied. One ad was discarded in that it specified a gay relationship,

leaving a total sample of 328. Of this number, 215 of the ads were placed by men (65.5%) and 113 by women (34.5%).

The mean age of people placing ads was 40.4. One hundred and twenty seven cases (38.7%) counted as missing data in that the age was not specified or was vague. The mean age for the two sexes was similar: 39.4 for women (with 50.4% of cases missing) and 40.7% for men (with 32.6% of cases missing).

Sex differences in desired companion attributes are summarized in Table I. It will be seen that for 10 of the 13 variables a statistically significant difference was detected. The three largest differences were found for attractiveness, professional and financial status. To summarize the table: in the case of attractiveness, physique, sex, and picture (physical attributes) the men were more likely than the women to seek these. In the case of professional status, employment status, financial status, intelligence, commitment, and emotion (nonphysical attributes) the women were more likely to seek these. The women were also more likely to specify education, honesty and humor, however not at a statistically significant level.

The data were explored further by collapsing several of the categories: the first 4 variables were collapsed into a "physical" category, Variables 5-7 were collapsed into an "employment" category, and Variables 8 and 9 were collapsed into an "intellectual" category. The assumption was that the collapsed categories were sufficiently similar (within the three new categories) to make the new larger categories conceptually meaningful; conversely, it was felt the remaining variables (10-13) could not be meaningfully collapsed any further.

Sex differences for the three collapsed categories are summarized in Table II. Note that the Table II figures were not derived simply by adding

Table I. Gender Comparison for Attributes Desired in Partner

Variable	Gender		Chi-square
	Desired by men (<i>n</i> = 215)	Desired by women (<i>n</i> = 113)	
1. Attractive	76 (35.3%)	20 (17.7%)	11.13 ^a
2. Physique	81 (37.7%)	27 (23.9%)	6.37 ^a
3. Sex	25 (11.6%)	4 (3.5%)	6.03 ^a
4. Picture	74 (34.4%)	24 (21.2%)	6.18 ^a
5. Profession	6 (2.8%)	19 (16.8%)	20.74 ^a
6. Employed	8 (3.7%)	12 (10.6%)	6.12 ^a
7. Financial	7 (3.2%)	22 (19.5%)	24.26 ^a
8. Education	8 (3.7%)	8 (7.1%)	1.79 (ns)
9. Intelligence	22 (10.2%)	24 (21.2%)	7.46 ^a
10. Honest	20 (9.3%)	17 (15.0%)	2.44 (ns)
11. Humor	36 (16.7%)	26 (23.0%)	1.89 (ns)
12. Commitment	38 (17.6%)	31 (27.4%)	4.25 ^a
13. Emotion	44 (20.5%)	35 (31.0%)	4.36 ^a

^aSignificant at the .05 level.

Table II. Gender Comparison for Physical, Employment, and Intellectual Attributes Desired in Partner

Variable	Gender		Chi-square
	Desired by men (<i>n</i> = 215)	Desired by women (<i>n</i> = 113)	
Physical (collapsing Variables 1-4)	143 (66.5%)	50 (44.2%)	15.13 ^a
Employment (collapsing variables 5-7)	17 (7.9%)	47 (41.6%)	51.36 ^a
Intellectual (collapsing 8 and 9)	29 (13.5%)	31 (27.4%)	9.65 ^a

^aSignificant at the .05 level.

the numbers in the Table I categories: recall that for Variables 1-4 a subject could specify all, one, or none; hence simply adding the Table I figures would be biased by those individuals who were more effusive in specifying various physical traits. Instead, the Table II categories are (like Table I) all or nothing: whether a subject specified one or all four of the physical attributes it would only count once. Thus, each score represented one person.

In brief, Table II gives similar, although more exaggerated results to Table I. (The exaggeration is the result of only one item of several being needed to score within a collapsed category.) The men were more likely than the women to specify some physical attribute. The women were considerably more likely to specify that the companion be employed, or have a profession, or be in good financial shape. And the women were more likely to emphasize the intellectual abilities of their mate.

One can, incidentally, also note from this table an overall indication of attribute importance by collapsing across sexes, i.e., it is apparent that physical characteristics are the most desired regardless of sex.

DISCUSSION

Sex Differences

This study found that the attitudes of the subjects, in terms of desired companion attributes, were consistent with traditional sex role stereotypes. The men were more likely to emphasize stereotypically desirable feminine traits (appearance) and deemphasize the nonfeminine traits (financial, employment, and intellectual status). One inconsistency was that emotional expressiveness is a feminine trait but was emphasized relatively less by the men.

Women, on the other hand, were more likely to emphasize masculine traits such as financial, employment, and intellectual status, and valued commitment in a relationship more highly. One inconsistency detected for the women concerned the fact that although emotional expressiveness is not a masculine trait, the women in this sample asked for it, relatively more than the men, anyway. Regarding this last point, it may be relevant to refer to Basow's (1986, p. 210) conclusion that "women prefer relatively androgynous men, but men, especially traditional ones, prefer relatively sex-typed women."

These findings are similar to results from earlier studies, e.g., Deaux and Hanna (1984), and indicate that at this point in time and in this setting sex role stereotyping is still in operation.

One secondary finding that was of some interest to the author was that considerably more men than women placed personal ads—almost a 2:1 ratio. One can only speculate as to why this was so; however, there are probably at least two (related) contributing factors. One is that social convention dictates that women should be less outgoing in the initiation of relationships: Green and Sandos (1983) found that women who initiated dates were viewed less positively than their male counterparts. Another factor is that whoever places the ad is in a "power position" in that they can check out the other person's letter and photo, and then make a choice, all in anonymity; one could speculate that this need to be in control might be more an issue for the men.

Methodological Issues

Content analysis of newspaper ads has its strengths and weaknesses. By virtue of being an unobtrusive study of variables with face validity, it was felt some reliable measure of gender-related attitudes was being achieved. That the mean age of the men and women placing the ads was similar was taken as support for the assumption that the two sexes in this sample were demographically similar. Further, sex differences in desired companion attributes could not be attributed to differential verbal ability in that it was found that length of ad was similar for both sexes.

On the other hand, there were some limitations. It could be argued that people placing personal ads are not representative of the public in general. For instance, with respect to this study, it was found that the subjects were a somewhat older group—mean age of 40—than might be found in other courting situations. This raises the possibility of age being a confounding variable. Older singles may emphasize certain aspects of a relationship, regardless of sex. On the other hand, there is the possibility that age differentially affects women in the mate selection process, particularly when children are desired. The strategy of controlling for age in the analysis was felt

problematic in that the numbers for analysis were fairly small, especially given the missing data, and further, that one cannot assume the missing cases were not systematically different (i.e., older) from those present.

REFERENCES

- Basow, S. (1986). *Gender stereotypes: Traditions and alternatives*, Brooks/Cole Publishing Co.
- Braito, R. (1981). The inferiority game: Perceptions and behavior. *Sex Roles, 7*, 65-72.
- Curry, T., & Hock, R. (1981). Sex differences in sex role ideals in early adolescence. *Adolescence, 16*, 779-789.
- Deaux, K., & Hanna, R. (1984). Courtship in the personals column: The influence of gender and sexual orientation. *Sex Roles, 11*, 363-375.
- Farrell, W. (1986). *Why men are the way they are*. New York: Berkley Books.
- Green, S., & Sandos, P. (1983). Perceptions of male and female initiators of relationship. *Sex Roles, 9*, 849-852.
- Halas, C. (1981). *Why can't a woman be more like a man?* New York: Macmillan Publishing Co.
- Harrison, A., & Saeed, L. (1977). Let's make a deal: An analysis of revelations and stipulations in lonely hearts advertisements. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 35*, 257-264.
- Hite, S. (1981). *The Hite report on male sexuality*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Hite, S. (1987). *Women and love: A culutral revolution in progress*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Nevid, J. (1984). Sex differences in factors of romantic attraction. *Sex Roles, 11*, 401-411.
- Shaevitz, M. (1987). *Sexual static*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co.
- Smith, D. (1973). Women, the family and corporate capitalism. In M. Stephenson (Ed.), *Women in Canada*. Toronto: New Press.
- Stiles, D., Gibbon, J., Hardardottir, S., & Schnellmann, J. (1987). The ideal man or women as described by young adolescents in Iceland and the United States. *Sex Roles, 17*, 313-320.
- Symons, D. (1987). An evolutionary approach. In J. Geer & W. O'Donohue (Eds.), *Theories of human sexuality*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Thiessen, D., & Gregg, B. (1980). Human assortive mating and genetic equilibrium: An evolutionary perspective. *Ethology and Sociobiology, 1*, 111-140.
- Urberg, K. (1979). Sex role conceptualization in adolescents and adults. *Developmental Psychology, 15*, 90-92.