

Chapter 4.17

A Trination Analysis of Social Exchange Relationships in E-Dating

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ABSTRACT

More than half a billion users across the globe have availed themselves of e-dating services. This chapter looks at the marketing and cross-cultural aspects of mate-seeking behavior in e-dating. We content analyzed 238 advertisements from online matrimonial sites in three countries: India (n=79), Hong Kong (n=80), and Australia (n=79). Frequencies of mention of the following ten attribute categories in the advertiser's self-description were established using post hoc quantitative analysis: love, physical status, educational status, intellectual status, occupational status, entertainment services, money, demographic information, ethnic information, and personality traits. Past research on mate selection using personal ads and the three countries' positions on Hofstede's dimensions of culture were used in hypotheses

generation. The results support several culture-based differences in people's self-description in online personal ads; however, some anticipated differences were not realized, suggesting that some cultural differences may not be as strong as Hofstede (2001) suggests.

INTRODUCTION

Family researchers and psychologists have investigated the attributes people desire in their life partners for almost 70 years (cf. Neely, 1940; Smith & Monane, 1953). However, cross-cultural differences in attribute preferences did not receive much attention until about 15 years ago (Buss, 1989). While several researchers have used personal ads to identify the qualities heterosexual males and females are looking for in a potential

mate (Harrison & Saeed, 1977; Hirschman, 1987; Goode, 1996), transporting this discourse to the domain of online personals is a somewhat recent development.

Arvidsson (2006) observes that Internet dating is an aspect of a more general trend to construct a common social world through communicative interaction. The “common social world” constructed through Internet personals will be impacted by the culture permeating the advertiser and the target audience (Barnlund, 1989; Kale, 1991). The core ideas and norms of a culture contribute toward an individual’s internal representation of the self, and how that self is related to important others (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998). Perceptions of the internal self will impact what the individual advertiser says about one’s self when seeking a potential mate. Since individual cultures across the globe show considerable differences along several important dimensions (e.g., Hofstede, 1991), these differences should be reflected in search behavior and interpretations of romantic love and intimacy across cultures (Dion & Dion, 1996). In a recent investigation of online ads, Ye (2006) observed that significant cultural differences can be observed in mate selection between Chinese and Americans.

The present study focuses on how cultural differences impact people’s external self-representation in e-dating. E-dating is of interest for two reasons: to gain insights into its explosive, widespread adoption throughout the World; and—what would seem to be a source of *resistance* to adopting this communication channel—is that it is an “impoverished” medium (Walther, 1996): it is devoid of face-to-face interaction, which prompts unanswered questions concerning how individuals present themselves in a “faceless” situation.

According to social exchange theory, the sustainability of a relationship is determined by satisfaction with the rewards vis-à-vis the costs in that relationship as compared to available alternatives (Bagozzi, 1975; Hirschman, 1987). To enhance the odds of initiating and maintain-

ing a viable intimate relationship, advertisers in personals ads are likely to offer and emphasize those aspects of self they believe a potential date or partner would find rewarding (Gonzales & Meyers, 1993). Which characteristics are deemed rewarding would be impacted by the culture of the target audience for e-dating (Hall & Hall, 1990; Kale, 1991).

This chapter explores differences in e-dating ads across three culturally diverse countries—India, Hong Kong, and Australia. The choice of countries was based on two considerations: first, to facilitate the content analysis, we wanted to choose countries where the use of English was widespread, and we wanted three countries which exhibited considerable across-country cultural diversity. Using Hofstede’s (1991) dimensions of national culture, we have generated a series of hypotheses on how cultural differences will impact self-presentation in online personal ads. The hypotheses are then tested through a post hoc quantitative analysis of ads on e-dating sites in these countries. The results suggest important cultural differences in self-presentation as well as some significant interactions between sex and country in accounting for variance in self-presentation.

STUDY BACKGROUND

[O]nline dating systems have begun to influence not only individual lives but also cultural notions of love and attraction ... But despite the incredible number of people using these services, we know little about how users perceive each other... It’s possible, too, that different subpopulations of users within the site are seeking entirely different things and using different evaluative techniques. (Fiore, 2007)

Research on people’s dating preferences is not new. Previous studies have explored differences in preferences with regard to an ideal partner

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