

# Attraction of the Internet: Successful Mate Selection Based on “Inner” Qualities?

Paper presented to  
INTERNET RESEARCH 1.0: The State of the Interdiscipline  
14-17 September 2000, Lawrence, Kansas

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“To Luhmann, society is a system of communication. The media contribute by preventing communication from being random” [For Luhmann er et samfund et system af kommunikation. Mediernes bidrag er at forhindre at kommunikationen overlades til tilfældet] (Thyssen 1991: 16, my translation)

Online personals have grown rapidly in the last few years (Doscher 1999; Hamilton 1999; Kim 2000; Miller 1998; Montgomery 1999; Peterson 1999). This is not surprising since it follows the trend in classified advertising as a whole, which consists of moving from print media to the Internet (Stone 1999a; Stone 1999b). By August 31, 2000, Yahoo! (*Yahoo!* 2000) lists hundreds of sites of which 13 are directory sites, each of which lists dozens of additional sites. One such specialized dating site directory, Aaren’s Dating Directory (*Aaren’s* 2000), lists 313 mail-order bride sites, 161 personals sites, 153 matchmakers, and a large number of additional categories. All of these sites communicate in English and have the entire English-speaking Internet population as their intended audience. It is thus safe to assume that online personals have become a staple in the inventory of Internet communication forms, but it is difficult to estimate how much this communication form is used.

## ***How does it work?***

Online personals can be divided into the following genres:

- Mail-order brides
- Matchmakers
- Dating sites

*Mail-order bride sites* primarily list women, advertising is free, and anyone can browse the advertisements anonymously and for free. In order to contact an advertiser, contact information such as address and/or phone number must be paid for. The women listed predominantly come from Eastern Europe, Asia, and South America. Virtually all advertisers are searching for someone to marry and a photograph accompanies virtually all advertisements. In many cases, the intended male partner should be financially stable and/or well educated. Sexual preferences are rarely mentioned. This kind of personal advertisements highlights the fact that the larger part of the world's marriages are still arranged with the goal of providing economic stability (Raybeck et al. 1996). Marriage and family are fundamental building blocks in traditional societies. Thus, marrying for financial reasons makes perfect sense. This corresponds to the pattern previously dominant in personal advertising, where “men offer financial and occupational attributes and seek physical attractiveness in partners whereas women offer physical attractiveness and seek resources and status attributes” (Jagger 1998: 795). The ideal type of relationship is assuring financial stability and a respected position in society.

Perhaps one should add that this is the ideal type of relationship as seen from the perspective of the female. Recently, the British National Criminal Intelligence Service has discovered that some of these sites are used in trafficking, i.e. the abduction of young and predominantly poor non-Western women for use in the sex industry of Europe (Moustgaard 2000).

*Matchmakers* usually offer some kind of assistance in finding the right match. Personal information is kept by the agency and the service is paid for. First meetings usually take place IRL (in real life, for lack of a better term). Long-term relationships are the goal. The underlying assumption here is that the successful relationship builds on finding *the* right person and if at all possible in the first try. If previous

relationships ended, it was because those were formed with partners who were obviously not the right one. The ideal type of relationship is lasting love.

*Dating sites* usually requires some kind of personal information to be stored in a public, searchable profile. Some sites are free; others have members-only sections with perks such as the ability to browse advertisements with photographs or to add a video sequence to the personal profile. Contacting other members is free and is usually done by anonymous e-mail. Both women and men are listed. In North America, ethnic origin is usually a searchable category. Most advertisers are looking for partners, but advertisements display a wide range of interests similar to personal advertising in newspapers. Many advertisements mention sexual preferences or alternatively deny any sexual interest. By contrast to mail-order bride sites, personal descriptions are frequently rich and detailed, mentioning tastes in music, film and literature, preferred pastimes, and hobbies. Dating sites thus seem to reflect the emergence of phenomena such as “serial monogamy” relationships or even “recreational sex.” The ideal type of relationship is based on infatuation, mutual sexual attraction, intimacy and common interests.

### ***Online personals as “killer application”***

Basically, it is easy to explain why online personals have become so popular. The sharp increase in the use of online personals since the mid-90'es follows a significant increase in the use of print personals, at least in the UK (Jagger 1998: 796) as well as North America (Parrott et al. 1997). But the Net holds more opportunities “to meet members of the opposite sex than 99.9 % of the people on this planet have ever had,” according to on-line matchmaker Dana Peach (Miller 1998). It's like walking into “a football stadium full of single people of the gender of your choice,” says alleged online-dating expert Trish McDermott (Doscher 1999). And for the most part, online personals are free.

Still, it is not the possibility of meeting anyone, but the possibility of meeting *the* one, which accounts for the popularity of online personals. Search capabilities quickly narrow down the selection to profiles of individuals with the right sex, the right sexual orientation, in the right age group, with a suitable height, with hair and eyes in the right color and living in the right part of the country – or the world. Compared to other contact forms such as private parties, singles bars, meeting at

school, at work or by chance, responding to an online personal ad has one additional advantage: The other part has made an explicit declaration of the desire to form a relationship.

To appreciate how much the use of online personals has grown, it is instructive to have a look at Danish-language sites. Denmark has 5.3 million inhabitants and very few other than native Danes speak the language. Accordingly, Danish-language sites have an audience in practice limited to Danes. By August 2000, Danes had dozens of Danish-language sites to choose from, including the following:

- dating.dk: 160,000 profiles<sup>1</sup>
- scor.dk: 80,000 profiles of which 9,000 are paying members<sup>2</sup>
- www.under-uret.dk: 29,000 profiles in four categories:
  - 1,300 “Net friends” (4.5 % of site total)
  - 1,700 “Friends” (5.9 % of site total)
  - 8,000 “Partners” (27.6 % of site total)
  - 18,000 “Lovers” (62.1 % of site total)<sup>3</sup>
- netdate.dk: 19,000 profiles<sup>4</sup>

Admittedly, some of the profiles listed are probably duplicates or no longer active, but the interactive nature of online dating relatively quickly dispenses with inactive advertisements. The sites listed above are all dating sites. It is interesting to note that match-making sites are almost absent from the Danish-language Internet. Mail-order brides sites are entirely absent but the English-language sites are certainly also used.

Considering that Danes advertise on non-Danish sites as well, a loose estimate would indicate that 250,000 Danes have used online personal advertising. Danish online personal sites will not allow advertising from children below the age of consent, which in Denmark is 15 years. If my estimate is correct, 5.8 % of the

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<sup>1</sup> According to chart.dk listing 8 September 2000

<sup>2</sup> Profiles are deleted when inactive for more than one month. Membership costs 349 DKK (42 USD) per year. Personal communication with webnurse@scor.dk, 4 September 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Number of advertisements as shown on the site 8 September 2000

<sup>4</sup> According to chart.dk listing 8 September 2000

population 15 years or older have advertised for a partner online (*Danmark i tal 2000: Befolkningen fordelt efter køn og alder pr. 1. januar 1999*). It is estimated that 3 million Danes have an Internet connection at home (Elmose ). Accordingly, if my estimate is correct, 8.3 % of those with an Internet connection have created an online personal advertisement.

One might assume that online personals sites were interesting only to singles in search of a partner and that those individuals who succeeded in finding a partner quickly dispensed with the medium. This happens in many cases, but some dating sites seem to become some sort of community sites for singles and couples alike. One possible explanation is that compared to the typical chat site, dating sites have a relatively stable population of clearly identifiable, albeit anonymous, individuals. At any rate, comparing statistics of the singles population with the total number of online personals makes little sense, especially considering that Danes use Danish as well as English-language sites.

### ***How online advertising changes the mating game***

The classic view in research on mate selection has been that “men offer financial and occupational attributes and seek physical attractiveness in partners whereas women offer physical attractiveness and seek resource and status attributes” (Jagger 1998: 795). Recent research has shown that another pattern is emerging where both “men and women seek intelligent, honest, and emotionally stable partners who are attractive and possess a “good” or “exciting” personality” (Regan 1998: 1294).

This kind of research obviously assumes that the mate selection process is governed by some kind of conscious free will. In Denmark at least, many have held - and some still hold - the opinion that the only way to meet ones future partner is to meet by chance. Lightning must strike without warning, so to speak. This view on the mate selection process has roots in the romantic period (Hougaard 1994). Now, numerous accounts of the online dating phenomenon have noted that online personals have become so popular that the stigmatization formerly attributed to print personal advertising (“lonely hearts advertising”) has virtually disappeared. Everybody knows somebody who found his or her partner on the Internet. It is considered more or less irrelevant whether this took place in a chat-room, in a USENET news group or at a

site for online personals, although some still prefer to describe their online meeting as having happened by chance – while “browsing.”

Some widely publicized accounts have related stories of individuals living continents apart and meeting by chance in a chat-room (Baker 1998). After a couple of months one moves from family, work and friends to join the other in another part of the world. This kind of relationship is described as based exclusively on love and mutual attraction. As in many other cases related to Internet use, what makes headlines is the atypical use of the medium. When online personals are used, chance meetings are the exception. And in at least two instances, the use of online personals enables individuals to willfully overcome otherwise insurmountable obstacles. One is the case of jailbabes.com, a site that successfully specializes in female prison inmates in North America (Brown 1998; Cromer 1998). Another is the large sub-category of sites advertising mail-order brides. Sites such as these cast light over less romantic but perhaps more significant uses of online personals.

Online personals are not simply a reproduction of print personals in the new medium. Traditional personal advertising is basically just classified advertising in combination with letter mail and in some cases telephone voice-links (Jagger 1998). The mail-order brides site features something akin to a homepage with a photograph and some tersely edited personal information. By contrast, the typical dating site offers a profile with personal information, anonymous e-mail, chat rooms, and searches in the profiles according to a number of criteria. Many offer considerably more, e.g. online shopping, real-life parties, erotic fiction, web-cams, etc.

In sum, sites with online personals display a customized selection of well-known Internet communication forms, including among others home pages, e-mail, chat, databases, search capabilities, and shopping. In this context then, the Internet is best viewed as infrastructure for different media and not as a medium in itself. The purpose of online dating is to get the best possible match between partners in a conscious and deliberate selection process – the exact opposite of the romantic ideal of the casual meeting. The medium serves the purpose of eliminating some of the randomness from mate selection in RL (real life) locations such as singles bars or private parties. Additionally, in the case of mail-order brides, the medium serves the purpose of overcoming the physical distance between prospective partners.

## ***But what is a successful mate selection?***

A large body of research testifies to the fact that measuring the quality of a relationship is far from easy (Fletcher, Simpson, and Thomas 2000). One reasonably straightforward method to determine whether the Internet is helpful in the formation of personal relationships would be to measure the duration of the relationships established. This method is severely flawed in several respects, however. First of all, online personal advertising is a relatively new phenomenon. Whether those relationships recently formed by way of online advertising will outlast those formed offline cannot be determined yet - although based on what we know, it seems likely (Baker 1998). Secondly, the quality of a relationship cannot be measured in duration alone. Duration admittedly is an important factor in relation to other relationship quality components such as trust, commitment, and intimacy. But as relationship formation figures prominently in the formation of one's identity, the role of the mate selection process itself should be reconsidered, as should the virtues of the long-lasting relationship.

It is important to note that the process of mate selection as evidenced by online personals is an on-going process, not a stage entered at the end of puberty and completely abandoned at the time of marriage. In late modern societies, the process of identity formation is especially pronounced during puberty or what Erik H. Erikson has called the 'psychosocial stage' of adolescence. In fact, as Erikson declares, "[e]pigenetically speaking, of course, nobody can quite "know" who he or she "is" until promising partners in work and love have been encountered and tested" (Erikson and Erikson 1997: 72). As Thomas Ziehe has noted, Erikson's observations on the life cycle has a few defects: First of all, the 'identity work' carried out in each stage of the life cycle is strongly influenced by the broader cultural context (Ziehe 1982: 23). Secondly, each individual typically revisits earlier stages at especially crucial turning points in the psychosocial development (Ziehe 1982: 27).

## ***Love in late modernity***

Since the online personals sites investigated here have a Danish cultural context, it is time to take a look at some aspects of this. The Danish society is notable for the percentage of pre-school children who are taken care of in nurseries and kindergartens. In recent years, the percentage has risen to 90.1 in the age group from

3-5 (*Danmark i tal 2000*: Institutioner: Antal indskrevne pr. 100 i pågældende alder). Also, the divorce rate is quite high. In 1998, the number of divorces was 38% of marriages, corresponding to 2.5 divorces per 1,000 inhabitants (*Danmark i tal 2000*: *Vielser og skilsmisser*). Possibly as a result of these and other factors such as exposure to the media, the transition from childhood to puberty takes place at an earlier age than previously. "Childhood has "shrunk"," as Danish media researcher Birgitte Tufte puts it (Tufte 1999: 3). Currently, the transition takes place on the average at the age of nine, when dolls and action-men are banished to the attic (Tufte 1999: 6). Shortly afterwards, young people start using chat rooms in their identity work (Clark 1998; Sjöberg 1999). Not to form stable relationships, just to try out the possibility relatively risk-free.

Another prominent feature of Danish society is the percentage of women who earn their own money. In 1998, 73.3 % of women and 81.6 % of men between 16 and 66 years were in the work force (*Danmark i tal 2000*: *Arbejdsmarked pr. 1. januar*). This is made possible by the extensive use of nurseries and kindergartens mentioned above. Additionally, Denmark has a high degree of social security. Women are not depending on men for their livelihood. Thus, the prospect of leaving a failed relationship and moving on to another and more promising partner is less daunting. In this conscious effort, chat rooms are of little use. These women and their prospective partners turn to dating sites instead. Conversely, some men who have success in their traditional bread-winning role and formerly would have used this as their best card in attracting a Danish female partner but have little else to offer now turn to mail-order brides sites.

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