HTTP://WWW.SEARCH FOR LOVE ON THE WEB

by

Douglas Raybeck & Kris Paap
Hamilton College

This is a work in progress. You may cite it, but please do not quote without permission.

INTRODUCTION

The Mating Game:

As anthropologists have long observed, most marriages in the world are arranged, not by the principles, but by older relatives, and the goal is not 'love' but economic stability and political alliances (Fortes 1962, Fox 1967, Murphy 1986, Radcliffe-Brown and Forde 1964). Marriage forms the family, the fundamental building block of societies (Murdock 1949) and, according to most peoples in the world, it is too important a relationship to be left to the emotional whims of the participants.

In the United States, however, love is the reason for mating. This perspective is supported by a complex romantic ethic enshrined in films, television and popular culture. Indeed, a common theme of many films is the triumph of love over cultural and parental constraints (Mantaro 2000). Those who marry for more practical reasons are labeled cold, calculating, or even 'gold-diggers' (a term reflective of traditional gender asymmetries).

Recently, however, the exclusive emphasis on love has been undergoing modification from two different fronts. Feminism has strongly critiqued the traditional subordinate woman's role and revealed the manner in which conventional constructions of femininity are used to reduce women's access to power (Davis 1990, Doyle and Paludi 1994, Penley, et al. 1991). Further, feminists have also lobbied for more egalitarian gender relations and have encouraged women to seek personal fulfillment through the workplace rather than the home (Freeman 1984, Sapiro 1994). Both of these trends have encouraged women to be somewhat less accepting of the romantic image of being 'swept away by a tide of emotion.'

At the same time both men and women have been experiencing strengthened societal constraints on their abilities to locate suitable mates. Increasing geographic and occupational mobility has meant access to fewer stable interpersonal networks. Where 'Aunt Bessie' was once able to suggest a desirable possibility, now she is back in Oshkosh without any knowledge of one's contemporary NYC circumstances. The comparative absence of networks derived from family and friends has reduced possibilities for introductions to appropriate others.

In addition, the pace of contemporary life, especially urban life, has greatly impeded the search for romance. Increasingly, the great majority of Americans and others in developed nations find they are being asked to do more in the same time...
span, to be more efficient, to utilize what had hitherto been 'free time' for productive activities (Anderson and McClard 1993, Birchall 1988, Levine 1988, McGrath and Kelly 1986). The impact of this ever-increasing demand for greater efficiency appears in both material and non-material culture. The prominence of fast-food services, predigested information services, pre-arranged trips, appointed buyers, as well as an increasing reliance on the web to supply everything from information to clothing to groceries, all reflect our increasing desire to save time. Add to this the proliferation of cell phones, PDAs, and assorted wireless means to stay linked to the internet, and we have little access to 'free' time (Raybeck 2000).

The impacts of altering the traditional concepts of femininity, moving an increasing number of women into the work force, and increasing the pressures for increased efficiency and less free time have all acted in concert to reduce opportunities for mate seeking, let alone for traditional conceptions of romance. One response to these difficulties has been a marked increase in the popularity and acceptance of advertisements in the personal columns. Just twenty years ago, an excellent study of this phenomena referred to personal ads by the popular cultural term, "lonely hearts advertisements" (Harrison and Saeed 1977). Now these columns are widely utilized by people from differing social strata and rather particularistic pastimes (Anonymous 1996). Most cities, including small ones, have newspapers with personal columns, and these are well utilized. The systems are usually similar. The ad placer calls an '800' number, records a message from which the ad is derived, and pays nothing for the listing. Respondents pay to listen to the lister's recorded message or to contact the lister from a code number appearing with the ad in the personals.

Our Concern:

The latest development in mate seeking has borrowed from two of the very elements that have served to constrain free time: the computer and the internet. The advent of web-based personals has altered the personal ads and meant instant access to a wider audience than can be encountered in print. The accessibility of the web makes it easy to change ads and play a more active role in the search for an 'other.' Finally, while one needs access to the web, the use of web-based personal ads is considerably more cost effective than print ads. In the case of the print media, ads are paid for by respondents who are charged more than a dollar per minute for phone calls they make to ad placers. On the web, while there are a variety of procedures, ten dollars will generally allow you to message as many as 50 ad placers.
Since the web presents a wide range of personal sites, it also offers both genders the opportunity to present themselves to different audiences. As a male anthropologist and female sociologist, our interests are in inspecting electronic personals for their cultural and social gender implications and in comparing the results of that examination to an earlier study of personals in the print media (Raybeck, et al. 1999). We anticipate that there will be both differences and similarities. Differences should stem from the wider range of audiences and the differences in the media, but we also expect that gender concerns, including the manipulation of gender discourses, will remain comparatively similar.

Our approach borrows heavily from the work of Erving Goffman (1961, 1967, 1971, 1979), particularly his Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (Goffman 1959). Goffman acknowledges that we are conscious actors in our social dramas and that we are capable of assessing our roles and how we play them, and of even rewriting the script when called for. Personal ads would seem well suited to this approach as both males and females must 'present' themselves to others in relatively few words. Further, they are aware that they will be judged both on what they say about themselves and on what qualities they are seeking in others. Finally, the lister must know that, should there be a desirable response, the respondent and the lister will meet and 'real' qualities will be apparent. This requires a degree of honesty, places restraints on the individual's presentation, and promotes subtle uses of cultural cues. It is clear that web sites are conscious of this limitation and often advise their subscribers on this matter.

PERSONAL ADS IN PRINT

Background:
There have been a number of good studies of personal ads in the last 30 years that have consistently supported United States gender stereotypes. They found that males tend to seek younger, physically attractive partners, while females are more interested in financial stability and emotional commitment (Cameron, et al. 1977, Davis 1990, Goode 1996, Harrison and Saeed 1977, Lance 1998). A more heartening recent study found personality to be the most mentioned category by both sexes, but otherwise, the only change in two decades had been the addition of 'non-smoking' as a desirable criterion (Lance 1998).

The majority of these studies have been strongly quantitative and have focused on the differences between what individuals seek and what they say about themselves. Our purpose here is not to challenge their findings or their methods.
Instead, we wish to augment their research, to examine the manipulation of the cultural elements involved in personal ad presentations, and to relate these to contemporary conceptions of gender and sexuality. Further, we wish to explore how a dramatic change in medium shapes the ways in which individuals approach and exploit the opportunities for the use and manipulation of cultural discourses around gender, sex, class, and "what is attractive" in order to increase their chances of finding a "soul mate", date, or sex partner in an increasingly complicated and fast-paced world.

Gender stereotypes are still with us and seem to color our preferences for partners and our presentations of self (Applebaum 1987, Hollan1992). However, Americans are also more sophisticated regarding these cultural stereotypes and that promotes both more candor and greater sensitivity to messages, both sent and received (Goode1996). Finally, our attitudes toward sexuality have become, if not more liberal, certainly more open (Deaux and Hanna 1984). Twenty years ago, personal ads seldom mentioned sexuality (Cameron, et al. 1977, Harrison and Saeed 1977), but now sexual preferences are openly professed (Deaux and Hanna 1984).

Our Earlier Research:

Our prior study was drawn from 18 months of a personals column in the Observer-Dispatch of Utica, a city in upstate New York. Greater Utica has an economically, educationally, and ethnically mixed populace of approximately 70,000 and serves perhaps that many people again in neighboring areas. The paper is staunchly middle-class in its perspective and serves a populace that is more conservative than liberal.

In examining the data, one received the consistent impression that men and women are aware of the interests and desires of the other sex ... even when these are at odds with dominant cultural scripts. Hence, while our findings replicated nicely the work of others by displaying consistent gender differences concerning such factors as age, marital status, financial status, etc., as discussed elsewhere (Davis 1990, Harrison and Saeed 1977, Lance 1998), they also demonstrated an intriguing complementarity between the genders.

To start, a far greater proportion of men than women omitted a description of their build while significantly more men mentioned build as a characteristic they were seeking. This was consistent with the findings of others that men are more concerned with the appearance of women than are women with the looks of men (Davis 1990, Harrison and Saeed 1977).
Particularly interesting, in light of the contemporary emphasis on thinness in the media, a significantly greater proportion of women than men described themselves as large, while more men stated that they were seeking a large or full-figured woman. Indeed, effectively the same number of large builds were described and sought, as were slim/petite builds.

The complementarity we perceived was not restricted to physical features. Thus, significantly more men described their employment status than did women, while significantly more women than men stated a desire for financially secure partners.

One area of complementarity that can be juxtaposed with the male concern with female figures, was the female concern with character traits. Our results indicated that character is a common concern for both genders, but far more so for women. As might be expected, more men described their character traits than do women.

Women seemed well attuned to the expectations of personal columns, treading a fine line between desirable descriptors and honesty. On the other hand, men seldom mentioned a desire for physical attractiveness, yet women supplied such information a majority of the time. It appeared that women were well aware of certain unstated cultural standards concerning the importance of femininity and appearance (Cameron, et al. 1977, Davis 1990, Harrison and Saeed 1977, Richardson 1981).

Men seemed aware of women's desire for honesty and this character trait figures prominently in the self-descriptors of males. Similarly they often described their success or professional status, another concern that women mentioned and one that figures prominently in other studies of personal ads (Cameron, et al. 1977, Davis 1990, Goode 1996, Harrison and Saeed 1977, Lance 1998). However, men also frequently described their athleticism and women seldom purported to desire this quality. It appears that men were sensitive to the expectations of the situation, but that they were also influenced by traditional male gender role qualities (Cameron, et al. 1977, Henley 1977, Richardson 1981).

Statements of interests, as opposed to character qualities, were intriguing. Presumably, both men and women are seeking individuals with interests similar to their own and a list of interests should ensure compatibility. We noted that there was relatively little gender difference concerning the interests expressed. Instead, we believe we found the descriptions of interests to serve a purpose beyond that of locating individuals with similar activities and proclivities. It seems that lists of
interests are being used as meta-messages concerning the ad placer.

One characteristic that was immediately apparent: a prodigious back-to-nature movement is sweeping the country, or at least the Utica area. It seems that a majority of both males and females spend time outdoors: camping, hiking and taking long walks (58% & 62%). The most preferred location for a long walk is along the beach, this despite the fact that, as the crow flies, Utica’s 60 miles from the shores of Lake Ontario and 170 from the Atlantic. More women than men express a preference for romantic dinners, and they are also more inclined to dance, but both activities are mentioned by men as well. Finally, those folk who are not out hiking the Adirondacks or frequenting a romantic restaurant, are enjoying a quiet evening at home, preferably in front of a “cozy” fire.

Clearly, it seems that both sexes, in addition to listing genuine interests, also employed this section of the personals to further their presentation of self. They are aware of and capable of employing culturally laden symbols (Hayakawa 1964, Ross 1957). People who spend time outdoors are connected to the natural world and to healthy activities. This may be taken to imply not only good life habits, but also sound character. Presumably, those who prefer nature to the artificiality of malls and cities are genuine and natural themselves ... ‘no games,’ a concern specifically mentioned by several ad placers.

While the mentions of an interest in romantic dining and evenings out needed little explication, the references to quiet evening sat home were probably intended to convey more than simple domesticity. In addition to imparting an image of someone who is home centered, this message also suggests a disinterest in external nightlife with its attendant artificiality and social games. Not one of the placers, male or female, claimed to enjoy the singles scene. Indeed, there were several comments from both males and females to the effect that they were ‘tired of the bar scene.’

**THIS STUDY**

**The Web:**

The web and its use have grown exponentially (literally) in the last 10 years. While it was initially associated with technophiles and the young, currently it is increasingly viewed as an accessible resource for all. Not only has there been a proliferation of service providers whose competition has kept the price manageable, the decentered nature of the web has made censorship and centralized control effectively impossible. The result is a wide range of accessible websites of highly
varied nature.

Sites dedicated to personals include both moderated and unmoderated boards, and those that serve heterosexual, gay and lesbian clientele. The larger, general sites usually accommodate all three preferences, while smaller sites can be quite specialized. These can range from rather traditional romance-seeking sites to ones that are adult-oriented, and even to highly specialized sites serving particular sexual interests such as bondage, domination and group encounters (see below).

People who use the web are geographical and demographically quite diverse, as are their motives for using the web (Neff 2000). Users are aware of the variations in quality and trustworthiness that can characterize various sites and most employ the web intelligently. Users are also aware of the anonymity ensured by this medium and they seem conscious that it is a mixed blessing, protecting identity, but also allowing considerable dissembling.

While we were interested in the assessing the range of web-based mating possibilities, including some of the more outré sites, our principal concern was a structured comparison of more traditional romantically inclined sites on the web with our earlier study of newspaper personals (Raybeck, et al. 1999). In addition to surveying the difference between print and electronic personals, we wanted to examine some of the differences and similarities between those seeking romantic engagements versus those who profess to be seeking principally sex. For reasons of clarity and parsimony we are restricting our discussion to heterosexual males and females. Finally, as in the earlier study, we wished to examine the role of language and code in the construction of personal 'presentations.' We caution the reader that the present report is provisional and that our research project is still in process.

Background:

The methods we employed varied according to the sites and our intent. Only one site, webpersonals.com was examined in detail and the results treated quantitatively. Three other sites were inspected and an effort was made to capture the flavor and representative personal ads of each. These included AmericanSingles.com, People2People.com and datingclub.com, three large general sites that were judged to be similar in content and aim to webpersonals.com. Consequently, they will not be reported on in detail. For comparative purposes and in order to assess gender differences, we also examined two sites of a more specialized nature. One for full-figured women and their admirers, and one devoted to sexual encounters. These will be discussed shortly.
The range of options presented to casual web ‘surfers’ is quite impressive as is the traffic that they seem to attract. AmericanSingles.com claims to have 1.3 million participants, and a cursory inspection of their lists suggests that this is quite possible. Within the area code (315) of the original newspaper study, a relatively rural area in Upstate New York, the site listed 500+ men and 500+ women (their maximum figure) as members. Amore novel site, headquartered in London, BeOutThere.com encourages people to place a 60 second video of themselves on-line for 60£. For the fee, the company will convert it to digital and upload it to their site.

Perhaps the most imaginative and distinctive site we encountered is webwoo.com (the friends of friends dating network) which asks people to act as matchmakers, sign up single friends, and possibly win $10,000 if one of the people they sign up get married as a result of the contact. The site engages other individuals who know the person seeking a contact and asks them to suggest possible matches. They then serve as a kind of intermediary to assure both parties that the contact is legitimate. Webwoo also runs a concierge that can make all the dating arrangements. The fee is directed to the dater who pays from 50-100 dollars depending on range of services desired. Of course the question arises as to why one wouldn't simply adopt this strategy without reliance on the web.

Finally, there is even a website search engine that bills itself as the ‘online relationship network’ where there is everything from ads to advice, to a variety of resources for those seeking information on personals. At XseeksY, the surfer can pick three options that he/she is seeking. These range from location, sexual preference (heterosexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian), to religion, ethnicity, age, interests (astrology, cars, entertainment, pen pals, pets, plus size, R-rated, single parent, socially conscious, support group, and vegetarian); and then you are led to a list of URLs that fit those interests. They also include reviews for most of the sites they list. They appear new and do not presently have a great deal of variety.

Two Colorful Sites:
In an (admittedly cursory) attempt to gain a sense of the range of variation available to those seeking web connections, we visited two less traditional sites that provide dating services: AdultFriendFinder.com, an adult site dedicated to promoting sexual liaisons, and Large-Encounters.com, a site dedicated to uniting large women with those who admire them.

AdultFriendFinder.com appears to be one of the largest sites of its type. According to their own files, they have well over a million listings in the United States and Canada (See Appendix1). Their welcoming page reads, in part, as
follows:

Welcome to Adult Friend Finder Erotic Personals!

Are you looking for a little spice in your sex life? Adult Friend Finder can help! We’re the largest adult personals and swingers’ directory with over 7,000,000 registered members with thousands of sexy photos! It’s FREE, easy, and anonymous to join! Every day, over 15,000 new people join Adult Friend Finder so you’ll always find new hot friends here!

If this is your first time here, please signup for a FREE membership!

What is there to do at Adult Friend Finder? Meet new friends and sex partners worldwide! Join the fun in our active chat rooms! Browse thousands of hot photos and profiles! Read articles, sex advice lines, and more in our free adult magazine!

Their profit is derived from memberships which allow participants access to unlimited other listings and to have shielded communication privileges. Participants are asked to provide the usual information concerning age, sex, appearance, etc., and are then given the opportunity to respond to the following categories: "What really turns me on: Encounters I am open to: and What I am looking for in a partner." We were impressed by the range and descriptiveness of the available items that could be listed and by the apparent candor of the participants. (See Appendix 2 for a representative example of an adult listing from the intimate section of WebPersonals.com.)

While we cannot claim to have examined this site in detail, our impression is that both men and women are candid in describing both themselves and what they are seeking. Indeed, the level of candor seems, in our judgement, to exceed that of the more traditional romance columns. Part of the reason for this maybe the more limited intent and increased pragmatism of the listers. A number of participants describe themselves as married and seeking “discreet encounters.” Presumably they have discovered that the base is sufficiently large and diverse to allow them to find a partner willing to accept, or at least to ignore, these circumstances.

Not surprisingly, given gender roles in the United States, far more men are seeking women than vice versa. For instance, in New York State 357,091 men are listed as seeking women, while only 21,936 women are seeking men. However, women are just as likely to be descriptive of their desires as are men. Further women are just as likely as men to be seeking sex in groups and are more likely to be seeking
sex with couples (see Appendix 3).

In addition to the specific 'adult' site, we investigated a specialty site, Large-Encounters.com, which bills itself as a site for Big Beautiful Women (BBWs) and their Admirers (BBWA). The membership of this site is listed as 10,000 and both men and women are apparently candid. This type of site more than others we have encountered, deals in physical description but most of it is directed toward the body. Thus, the women describe their height, weight and, often, measurements, but less frequently their overall appearance. However, when they discuss what they are seeking, the comments are heavily directed toward character rather than appearance. Men state that they are seeking a particular physical type and often express a preference for character qualities. (See Appendix 4 for a representative selection of the listings for both sexes.)

One intriguing element that comes through from both women's and men's listings is that the character quality most frequently sought, especially by women, is a 'sense of humor' (SOH). Running a close second was the request for someone who is 'down to earth' (DTE). The acronyms reflect the popularity of the qualities they refer to, but it is also likely that they encourage listing these qualities. People who use them indicate that they are familiar with the site and have done their homework. Not surprisingly, this site does not allow much space for participants to describe themselves and what they are seeking. Their descriptions, therefore, more closely parallel in length and use of acronyms, the personal ads in newspapers, even though the specialized nature of the site results in a greater focus on the physical.

WebPersonals.com - A Representative Site:

In order to be able to better compare web-based personals to those founding newspapers, we needed to select a representative site. While there are several good candidates, we chose WebPersonals.com, a popular site that claims more than a million participants and one that offers a range of relationship possibilities. The site maintains three boards; one designated dating, one labeled romance, and one termed intimate. While we have interests in all three, the board dedicated to romance is clearly the one most comparable to personal ads in print and the one on which we have focused most of our attention in this report.

WebPersonals.com is well organized and quite differentiated, both in terms of the variety boards it maintains and in the differing manners in which it allows participants to express themselves. All participants have sections where they can describe themselves, the nature of the relationship they are seeking and the sort of person they are hoping to find (See Appendix 5). However, in addition to this 'essay
question' format there are also multiple-choice queries, categories where individuals are asked to choose self descriptors (age range, etc.) and three exemplars from each of three categories to represent their interests. Thus, for the romance board, after people have filled out a series of descriptors ranging from height and weight to religion and education, there are three categories to which one may respond: "Things That I Value," "I Enjoy in My Spare Time," "My Idea of Romance Includes." Each category contains 30 to 50 descriptors that may be checked and which then become part of the participant's description. (See Appendix 6 for a full listing of descriptors for the Romance Board of WebPersonals.com.)

Obviously, pre-existing categories such as these can both reflect and reinforce social and cultural patterns. Indeed, it is our distinct impression that they have been chosen by the site managers because of their cultural popularity, but their presence also reminds participants of stereotypic expectations for Americans in general and both genders in particular. Thus under the heading "My Idea of Romance," we were pleased to find numerous examples of outdoor activities, and our old friends, "moonlight swim" and "a walk along the beach," which had been so popular in the print ads. Further exemplars included two of our most common domestic markers, "cuddling by a roaring fire" and "dinner by candlelight." We would suggest again that "cuddling by a roaring fire" is probably intended to evoke images of domestic tranquility that contrast with more superficial nightlife opportunities. (If meant literally, "cuddling by a roaring fire" would seem a fine means of cultivating second-degree burns.)

Interestingly, even the 'essay' section of the ads is subject to considerable guidance. Participants are instructed to:

Key #1: Have a great opening line.
Key #2: Show don't tell.
Key #3: Don't use clichés or platitudes.
Key #4: Embellish points.
Key #5: Be honest.
Key #6: Address the right audience.
Key #7: Use the right tone.

These suggestions are then elaborated and examples given so that the individual can create an appropriate ad much like others. Thus, the site expends 853 words describing how to create a captivating headline. Indeed, if these instructions were not enough, there is even a section where the participant is encouraged to utilize the drafting facilities of the site to create a descriptive essay (See Appendix 7).
Obviously, this sort of guidance can create a misleading degree of homogeneity in the appearance of ads. Fortunately, for our purposes, there is still considerable variability in the selection of descriptors and in the shaping of ads.

**Results**

As in the earlier study of personal ads in print, we are utilizing both qualitative and quantitative means to assess the web-based personal ads. While our findings are provisional, we are pleased to note that, thus far, both methodologies seem to reflect similar dynamics.

Our qualitative observations, while not final, do support some interesting arguments. It appears that some of the patterns discovered in print ads carry over very nicely. Thus, there are numerous participants who reference outdoor activities as interests, and who also like domestic pursuits. We continue to regard these assertions as clever metacommunications intended to reflect well on the person who is placing the ad.

The actual exemplars available to participants are chosen by site administrators, but, with some curious exceptions such as 'flower arranging' as a spare time pursuit, they nicely reflect most of the themes found in print ads. We separated out the descriptors and tried to identify the cultural themes that seemed to be represented. (The full list of descriptors for the Romance Board of WebPersonals.com appears in Appendix 6.) Our preliminary grouping is as follows:

**Things That I Value:**
- Personal Qualities
- Social-Style/Ethics

**I Enjoy in My Spare Time:**
- Crafts
- Outdoors
- Intellectual/Cultural
- Entertainment/Self-Indulgence

**My Idea of Romance Includes:**
- Indoor
- Outdoor
- Gift/s
- Going Out
- Thoughtful Acts
These three categories allow respondents to indicate, not only the interests called for, but also, to some degree, the qualities they wish to be seen to possess. Thus, we find that both men and women tend to shift their choice of descriptors in each of the three categories so that, when they are finished, they have covered the three important elements: naturalness (honesty, as indicated by outdoor activities), domesticity and ethical concerns (an indication of the importance of real rather superficial pursuits), and sensitivity (reflected in thoughtful acts and gifts). Thus, someone who suggests that they enjoy an outdoor activity in their spare time is more likely to omit the outdoors as a descriptor of their idea of romance and to mention a domestic or sensitive quality.

Our quantitative results are still in the formative stage. Having limited the search to people in our local area (approximately 100 mile radius), our sample was obtained by selecting every third listing in the Romance Board section of WebPersonals.com. We examine the presentation of men and women (SELF) in terms of what seem to be the dominant qualities emphasized in their ads (looks, character, lifestyle, none, sex and compatibility) and their descriptions of what they are seeking (OTHER).

**MEN: SELF (n=48)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Looks</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifestyle</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compatibility</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**MEN: OTHER (n=48)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Looks</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifestyle</td>
<td>7*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>0**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compatibility</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Interestingly, all 7 of these also emphasized 'lifestyle' for self
please note that sex as a category was subsumed under compatibility because of the lister's presentation. Thus, sex was put forth as more of a compatibility issue; that is (for example) the issue was not "sex" per se but being able to put up with such things as "my sex drive and foot fetish...".

**WOMEN: SELF (n=34)**

- Looks: 3
- Character: 12
- Lifestyle: 17
- None: 2
- Sex: 0
- Compatibility: NA

**WOMEN: OTHER (n=34)**

- Looks: 2
- Character: 22
- Lifestyle: 6
- None: 2
- Sex: 0
- Compatibility: 2

(Please see Appendix 11 for a description of the coding protocols.)

It is more common for women to express a desire to encounter a financially secure male than vice versa. However, in the medium of the web, men express physical preferences far less often than they do in print. Indeed, both genders seldom comment on this dimension. This may well be due to the fact that all participants are expected to list such elements as height, and body type, and because ads are often accompanied by photos, the best way to eliminate questions concerning appearance.

It is clear that both men and women emphasize lifestyle and character, though they do so in somewhat different ways. Compared to women, men make considerable use of lifestyle variables in describing themselves, while women are more likely than men to emphasize their character. This contrasts markedly with our research on print ads in which men, aware of women's interest in this variable, seemed to present their character attributes for appreciation. It suggests a new trend
Men cite compatibility markedly more often than do women. It is they who seek someone to 'fit in' with their lifestyle. This finding, while distinctive, seems consonant with earlier studies of personal ads in print and with cultural stereotypes of gender relations.

Women, as prodded by the ad drafting aid (Appendix 7), when given the opportunity to respond to "I'm more than just a..." sometimes insert woman. Not surprisingly, given gender roles in the United States, no men in our sample responded that they were more than "just a man." Being a man seems quite adequate, while the stereotypic of woman, is more decorative than substantive. Women who suggest that they are more than 'just a woman' seem to be asserting their importance as persons, a trend we discuss below.

DISCUSSION

Anthropologists, most sociologists and many cognitive psychologists are strongly agreed that people construct meaning in their lives. Earlier images of culture treated it as though it were directive, and people were simply passively socialized into its patterns, like unthinking slaves receiving directions from an Egyptian overseer as they labor to construct a pyramid of meaning. Our own orientation holds that people are meaningful participants in their cultures, aware of their circumstances and capable of taking steps to affect patterns both of significant symbols and of mores. This does not mean that people are perfectly aware of all the social and cultural forces that act on them, or that they can determine their circumstances, but it does mean that they are capable of refined and sophisticated utilization of a range of cultural symbols. They present a self in a fashion that textured and that draws upon culturally relevant associations in an intricate fashion.

We have tried to demonstrate that our data support an argument that each gender is aware of the preferences and interests of the other, and that the information they include about themselves reflects not only a desire to be perceived as attractive by the opposite sex, but also a sensitivity to how attractiveness is constructed by the other. Further, both males and females appear to utilize cultural symbols and associations to texture their “presentation of self” and to add a subtle dimension to their personas that reflects genuineness, health, and good character.

We continue to be impressed by the communication sensitivity and general
sophistication of personals ad placers, whether these be in print or on the web. However, there are some significant differences between the ads found on the web and those in local newspapers. It does appear that women are being empowered both by the scope of the web and its accessibility. Far more than in the print media, we find women asserting their particular interests, be these character or physical (see above) and the tenor of their specific ads is also more self-centered, albeit with several exceptions. Indeed, although the numbers are very small, it appears that women are more likely to express an appearance for looks than are men ... a finding in direct contrast with our earlier print study.

With one rather important proviso, it is our impression that ads on the web are actually more candid than ads in print. (See Appendix 9 for a good example.) This seems to be particularly so for ads at specialty sites such as AdultFriendFinder.com or Large-Encounters.com. While it is difficult to ascertain the reasons for this apparent increase in candor, we believe the most likely causes to be both the size of the web audiences and the great diversity of web sites. Thus those who seek a rather specialized kind of encounter can locate a site that caters to it, and are well advised to be frank in what they are like and in what they seek. After all, the participant is simply seeking a successful connection or two, not innumerable successes.

Our one caution derives both from the flexibility of the web, and from the extant possibility that individuals may not only represent themselves as something they are not, but may also create and present more than one persona on the web. Thus in our research, we encountered one woman who had created two personae, one for the Romance Board of WebPersonals.com and one for their Intimate Board. While the personal profiles of both are consistent, one presentation is of a woman seeking a rather low-key personal relationship, possibly long-term, while the other is of a woman seeking an S&M relationship in which she would be dominated. Reviewing the two ads there seems no way to infer one set of interests from the other (See Appendix 10). We are not suggesting that she is being deceptive, but simply that she sees herself as playing to very different audiences. Nonetheless, this example serves to underscore the range of possible realities that may lie behind personal ads.

We are persuaded that the social and temporal pressures that currently characterize life in the United States are likely to intensify rather than to abate (Raybeck 2000). Consequently, more people from varied walks of life are increasingly apt to utilize the web to seek companionship ranging from casual to long term relationships. This study suggests that, employed judiciously, personal ads are a good preliminary means to identify promising possibilities. However, as in most walks of life, our study also indicates that pursuit of others via personals
should be both tentative and cautious: Caveat prosequere!
Notes

1. Reflect for a moment on the recent box office successes of Pretty Woman, Moonstruck, Sleepless in Seattle, You've Got Mail, Notting Hill, etc.

2. From the site, WebPersonals.com, the following admonition concerning honesty: #5" Be Honest. "Ultimately, if your ad works as intended, you'll want to meet your perfect match. I am always amazed by the number of people who forget this and try to lie about their looks or job or what they want or whatever. Obviously this never works, because all is revealed when you meet face to face. ****So, don't be dumb, instead of letting other people down when the truth is revealed, be proud of what you have and choose to highlight your better aspects in your ad. *** Or, try being vague instead. Better the mystery of something left unsaid than the harsh realities of a lie exposed. At the very worst, just don't mention things you don't want others to know right away. Another name for walking the fine line between total honesty and a vague but true description is, "Spin control." No one would ever describe himself or herself as an"88 year old woman who drinks like a fish and could lose a few pounds," however, "experienced woman, full of life, who enjoys the occasional cocktail," may just work. Whichever route you choose, *** keep in mind that, ultimately, you'll have to confront your fears, either when somebody asks about them or when you meet. At that point honesty is the only option. ***

3. While admittedly anecdotal, the senior author is familiar with two individuals over the age of ninety who have recently purchased their first computer in order to be able to access the web.

4. It is likely that these figures are inflated by individuals who register more than once by utilizing different mail addresses. The existence of Hotmail, Yahoo and other sites providing free email permits this possibility.

5. In case you wonder how we can be so certain that this is the same individual, she included the same picture on both boards.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We want to thank Karen Raybeck for suggesting editorial revisions, and to express our appreciation of the World Wide Web, Macintosh computers and Vivaldi's Oboe concerti (particularly D Minor RV454). All of these made our task easier.

COMMUNICATIONS

Anyone interested in communicating with us about this paper should contact the senior or junior authors:

Douglas Raybeck - Kris Paap
Anthropology Dept. - Sociology Dept.
Hamilton College
198 College Hill Road
Clinton, NY 13323

e-mail: draybeck@hamilton.edu
REFERENCES

Anderson, K., and A. McClard

Anonymous

Applebaum, Herbert, ed.

Birchall, Johnston

Cameron, Catherine, Stuart Oskamp, and William Sparks

Davis, Simon

Deaux, Kay, and Randel Hanna

Doyle, James A., and Michele A. Paludi

Fortes, Meyer, ed.

Fox, Robin

Freeman, Jo, ed.

Goffman, Erving

Goffman, Erving

Goffman, Erving

Goffman, Erving

Goffman, Erving

Goode, Erich

Harrison, Albert A., and Laila Saeed

Hayakawa, S. I.

Henley, Nancy M.

Hollan, Douglas
Lance, Larry M.  

Levine, Robert V.  

Mantaro, Thadeus  
2000 Personal Communication.

McGrath, Joseph E., and Janice R. Kelly  

Murdock, George Peter  
1949 *Social Structure*, New York: Macmillan Co.

Murphy, Robert F.  

Neff, Raymond K.  

Penley, Constance, et al., eds.  

Raddiffe-Brown, A. R., and Daryll Forde, eds.  

Raybeck, Douglas  

Raybeck, Douglas, et al.  
1999 SWF ISO LTR: The Quest For Love And Meaning In The Personals. In *98th*
Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association. Chicago, IL:

Richardson, Laurel Walum

Ross, Ralph

Sapiro, Virginia