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“Your Mother Would Like Me”: Self-Presentation in the Personals Ads of Heterosexual and Homosexual Men and Women

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This study examined self-presentation strategies in the personals ads of heterosexual and homosexual men and women. Ads were coded for physical descriptors and offers of and appeals for attractiveness, financial security, expressiveness, instrumentality, sincerity, and sexual activities. The interaction of gender and sexual orientation was often the best predictor of ad contents. Specifically, (a) gay men emphasized physical characteristics most and lesbians least; (b) heterosexual women mentioned attractiveness more than lesbians did; (c) women solicited more expressive traits and offered more instrumental traits than men; (d) gay men mentioned sexuality more than other advertisers; and (e) heterosexuals were more likely than homosexuals to pursue long-term relationships and to mention sincerity and financial security. The advantages of using personals ads as a source of data about self-presentation, societal definitions of attractiveness, and changing social forces are discussed.

Despite increasing opportunities to meet others through both telephone and video dating services, personals advertisements remain a popular resource in the quest for a dating or relationship partner. Like the other two kinds of services, personals advertisements serve two purposes. First, they afford advertisers the opportunity to present themselves in the best possible light. Second, they enable advertisers to specify the type of respondents they desire. (Of course, such specifications also reflect self-presentation concerns, the implication being “I am the kind of person who values . . .”) Whether advertisers extend offers of desirable qualities or make appeals for same, ad contents typically reflect characteristics that are most valued in any given locale at any given time. Personals ads thus provide researchers with an intriguing source of information about self-presentation strategies, relationship goals, and contemporary societal defini-

tions of what is attractive or desirable, and about gender stereotypes as well.

Although one of the first published studies of personals ads (Harrison & Saeed, 1977) examined the matching hypothesis, most research conducted after this early study has addressed hypotheses based on social exchange theory (e.g., Bolig, Stein, & McKenry, 1984; Deaux & Hanna, 1984; Hirschman, 1987). According to exchange theory, the endurance of a relationship is determined by satisfaction with both rewards and costs in that relationship and with available alternatives. Consequently, to enhance the odds of initiating and maintaining a viable relationship, advertisers in personals ads are likely to offer those characteristics they believe a potential date or partner would find rewarding and to solicit those characteristics they themselves find rewarding.

Most predictions about advertising strategies (whether or not addressing exchange theory) are based on the notion that advertisers' assumptions about what is desirable to potential partners and what is reasonable to expect from them will reflect traditional gender stereotypes about what men and women are like (or prescrip-

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tions about what they *should* be like). Thus, if a man wants to attract a woman, he is wise to offer those characteristics women find appealing in a man; if he wants to attract a *desirable* woman, he is wise to specify the appealing characteristics he can reasonably expect in a woman. The same strategy holds for women who seek to attract men.

Empirical studies have supported this assertion that gender stereotypes influence how men and women describe themselves and how they describe the ideal partner. For example, Feingold (1990) summarized five research paradigms used to study gender differences in the importance of physical attractiveness. His meta-analysis revealed that men's personals ads contained more solicitations of physical attractiveness than women's. Other investigations of personals ads have revealed that men seek physical attractiveness and offer financial security more than women do (e.g., Deaux & Hanna, 1984; Hirschman, 1987; Koestner & Wheeler, 1988). In addition, Koestner and Wheeler (1988) found that men offered expressive traits and sought instrumental traits. Women's ads complemented men's: Women offered instrumental traits and sought expressive ones, and they offered attractiveness and sought financial status.

To this point, we have discussed only the relationships of heterosexual men and women. Unfortunately, the ads of homosexuals have not often been the focus of researchers' attention.¹ Deaux and Hanna (1984) completed one of the only studies comparing the ads of heterosexual men, heterosexual women, homosexual men, and homosexual women. Among the categories in their study were two that reflected resources to be exchanged by men and women: financial security and attractiveness. Other categories, however, did not reflect complementary resources to be exchanged by men and women heterosexuals or by lesbians or gay men. For example, unlike Koestner and Wheeler (1988), Deaux and Hanna (1984) did not include such gender-linked complementary categories as expressiveness and instrumentality, the former associated with traditional femininity and the latter with masculinity.

As noted, gender stereotypes influence the characteristics heterosexual advertisers offer and solicit, but what of homosexuals? Their preference for same-sex relationship partners represents the repudiation of a fundamental gender stereotype: that men will be attracted to and will forge romantic relationships with women and that women will be attracted to and will forge romantic relationships with men. Although gay men and lesbians may have adopted some characteristics associated with the stereotypes of their respective genders, homosexuals are likely to eschew many characteristics associated with traditional gender stereotypes in their search for a relationship partner. Instead they may rely on stereotypes, norms, and values associated with the gay male and

lesbian subcultures. Like heterosexuals, however, they are likely to tailor their self-presentation strategies to the type of relationships they seek.

One widely held stereotype of homosexuals—gay men in particular—is that they are less interested than heterosexuals in pursuing enduring relationships (e.g., Bhruha, 1988). In fact, in Bhruha's (1988) survey of gay men, although a majority of respondents agreed that gay men are *capable* of forging "stable" relationships, over half also agreed that, in general, gay men are promiscuous. Other survey research has revealed that lesbians, compared with heterosexual couples (equivalent in sociometric status, income, and age), were less confident that their relationships would endure (Schneider, 1986); indeed, according to the author, their relationships *were* less durable.

Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found that heterosexual married couples surveyed had lived together an average of 13.9 years, gay male couples 6.0 years, and lesbian couples 3.7 years. The sources of these relationship longevity differences are myriad and complex. One source may be the different forces that have an impact on heterosexual versus homosexual couples. Heterosexual couples continue to experience a variety of religious, social, economic, and legal barriers to the dissolution of long-term or marital relationships. Homosexual couples, however, experience more impediments to maintaining relationships than to dissolving them; societal intolerance and homophobic attitudes can take their toll on even the strongest gay and lesbian relationships.

Unfortunately, given the paucity of timely empirical research on the initiation and maintenance of homosexual relationships, there are only indirect data to suggest that homosexuals are less likely than heterosexuals to pursue permanent relationships and less likely to maintain the relationships they establish. Nonetheless, assuming there are differences in the relationship goals of homosexuals and heterosexuals—or in the subjective assessment of the feasibility of those goals—these differences may lead to different advertising strategies. Some characteristics seem more important for maintaining a lasting relationship than others. For example, physical attractiveness and erotic attraction are likely to be less important over the long haul than a sincere commitment to prevent exploitation of the relationship partner or than financial security or gainful employment. Hence, advertisers hoping to build lasting relationships are more likely to place emphasis on the latter characteristics (sincerity, security) than advertisers less interested in long-term relationships. To the extent that heterosexuals are looking for longer-lasting relationships than homosexuals, they are more likely to use terms related to sincerity and security than homosexuals are. Moreover, because heterosexuals' ads are likely to reflect traditional gender stereotypes, the ads of men and women are

expected to reflect social exchange forces (cf. Deaux & Hanna, 1984; Hirschman, 1987; Koestner & Wheeler, 1988). Specifically, women will offer resources men seek, and men will offer resources women seek.

We also expect that, for characteristics less important to building a long-term relationship (i.e., attractiveness, expressiveness, instrumentality, sexual references), sexual orientation will not be so powerful a predictor of ad contents as gender, which may be modified by the interactive contribution of sexual orientation. Specifically, women—heterosexual and homosexual—should make more offers of instrumentality and more appeals for expressiveness than men, for instrumentality reflects the increasing independence and self-sufficiency of women, and expressiveness reflects women's preference for a communal orientation in a partner, be that partner a man or a woman. We also expect that heterosexual women will make more offers of attractiveness than other advertisers and that lesbians will make fewer offers of or appeals for attractiveness than other advertisers. Last, we expect that gay men will make significantly more offers of and appeals for sexual characteristics or activities than all other advertisers.

Finally, many if not all researchers have coded personals ads in a dichotomous fashion. With this method, data reflect simply whether each ad contains one or more words from a particular category (e.g., physical attractiveness, security, instrumental traits). The number of references to each category was not assessed. Thus, most previous research has so restricted descriptions of personals ads contents that the results do not reflect the amount of time and effort devoted to certain descriptor categories. To note that an advertiser mentions both attractiveness and financial security descriptions in an ad does not inform us about the relative weight assigned to each category. We believe that an ad containing six references to physical attractiveness and one reference to financial security, for example, differs qualitatively from an ad containing one reference to attractiveness and six references to financial security. Because advertisers work to limit ad contents for financial reasons, much that they *could* say were the ads free is lost. To forgo continuous measures of ad contents is to lose even more information, failing to make maximum use of advertisers' carefully crafted—if telegraphic—prose. Consequently, the current study is secondarily concerned with a comparison of the results of nonparametric and parametric data analyses.

METHOD

Advertisements

Personals ads were selected from three geographical regions, including both coasts (New York and the San

Francisco Bay Area) and the Midwest (Chicago and Minneapolis), to enhance the generalizability of results. These ads had been published in the following free or low-cost weekly, bimonthly, or monthly newsprint publications: *The New York Native*, *The Village Voice*, *The Chicago Reader*, *Chicago Outlines*, *Gay Chicago*, *The Twin Cities Reader*, *Equal Time*, *The San Francisco Bay Guardian*, *Coming Up*.² Ads mentioning paid services or products, ads written by bisexuals, and ads concerning group sex were omitted. A total of 2,008 ads published between October 1988 and May 1989 were coded. From the total, we randomly sampled 25 ads written by homosexual men, heterosexual men, homosexual women, and heterosexual women in each of the three geographical regions. Thus, data from a random sample of 300 ads (25 ads \times 2 genders \times 2 sexual orientations \times 3 regions) were analyzed.

Procedure

Trained coders recorded the following objective information for each ad: source, advertiser gender, sexual orientation, race, age, height, weight, hair color, eye color, any additional objective physical characteristics (e.g., bald, mustache), type of relationship sought (e.g., marriage, occasional joint activities), and the total number of words in the ad.

For each ad, coders tallied the frequency of words in each of six content categories: attractiveness, financial security, expressiveness, instrumentality, sincerity, and sexual references. Frequencies also reflected whether advertisers claimed those specific characteristics or solicited them from prospective partners. Criteria for inclusion were strict; a master list of all words subsumed by any given category was compiled, and ad contents were compared with the master list. This list was initially based on classifications used in previous research. However, the list was also in part empirically derived; during the raters' training period, some words not in the original master list were added to yield a final list of words encompassed by any given category. A brief description of each of the six content categories follows.³

Attractiveness. The list of desirable characteristics was based on the guidelines of Deaux and Hanna (1984) and Harrison and Saeed (1977) and was then expanded to include novel terms encountered in the ads themselves. Examples of *physical attractiveness* characteristics are *athletic*, *petite*, *cute*, *attractive*, and *slender*. Objective descriptors of what the advertisers sought (e.g., "seeks blue-eyed blond") were also considered attractiveness characteristics, for we assumed that advertisers would not solicit such characteristics did they not consider them attractive. The attractiveness category also included such *socially attractive* characteristics as *classy*, *debonair*, and *sophisticated*.

Financial security. This list of terms, also used by Harrison and Saeed (1977) and Deaux and Hanna (1984), included such words as *accomplished, generous, professional, and established*, as well as any mention of a specific job or occupation (e.g., "solid tax attorney type") or home ownership.

Expressive traits. Koestner and Wheeler (1988) included a relatively short list of expressive traits in their study of personals ads. This list included characteristics generally considered to be more common among women than men. Additional words—derived from the ads in the current sample—yielded a final list including such characteristics as *affectionate, caring, emotional, empathic, nurturing, and sensitive*.

Instrumental traits. Koestner and Wheeler (1988) also used a list of instrumental terms. Although they did not define the concept *instrumentality* (providing only a list of exemplars), we defined the concept as any characteristic that is predominantly goal or success oriented in nature. This construct subsumed such traditionally masculine characteristics as *aggressive, ambitious, competitive, intelligent, and striving*.

Sincerity. Also used by Harrison and Saeed (1977) and Deaux and Hanna (1984), this category referred to committed, monogamous behaviors and to characteristics that would prevent exploitation in an intimate relationship. Examples of sincerity terms are *commitment-minded, considerate, dependable, one-woman man, one-man woman, faithful, monogamous, and respectful*.

Sexual references. This category included any reference to physical contact, explicit sexual behavior, fantasies, or sex-related physical characteristics. This broadly defined category included everything from snuggling, cuddling, holding hands, and kissing to preferred sexual roles (French or Greek, active or passive), sadomasochism, water sports, and references to penis length.

Each ad was coded by 2 of 10 carefully trained raters who were blind to the hypotheses under investigation. The two particular raters for each ad were varied systematically, such that no two raters consistently rated the same ads. Discrepancies were resolved by consensus. Interrater reliabilities for both offers and appeals within each of the six content categories were acceptable; Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients ranged from .839 to .926 ($M = .889$; $Mdn = .891$).

RESULTS

Nonparametric Analyses

Physical descriptors. Ads were coded for the presence or absence of such "objective" descriptors as hair color, eye color, height, weight, and race. For each of these depen-

TABLE 1: Number and Percentage of Advertisers Using Physical Descriptors

Ad Contents	Heterosexual		Homosexual	
	Men (n = 75)	Women (n = 75)	Men (n = 75)	Women (n = 75)
Hair color ^{ac}	4 (5%)	11 (15%)	25 (33%)	7 (9%)
Eye color ^a	2 (3%)	6 (8%)	24 (32%)	4 (5%)
Height ^{bc}	20 (27%)	16 (21%)	43 (57%)	8 (11%)
Weight ^{ab}	12 (16%)	4 (5%)	38 (51%)	7 (9%)
Race ^b	52 (69%)	41 (55%)	53 (71%)	31 (41%)

NOTE: For each content category, superscript *a* indicates a significant ($p < .05$) main effect for sexual orientation, superscript *b* indicates a significant main effect for gender, and superscript *c* indicates a significant Gender \times Sexual Orientation interaction.

dent variables, a logistic regression was conducted to determine whether gender, sexual orientation, or the interaction of the two predicted the use of these physical descriptors.

Logistic regressions for the mention of *hair color* and *eye color* both revealed significant main effects for sexual orientation; more homosexuals than heterosexuals mentioned both hair and eye color ($\chi^2_\Delta = 4.96$, $p < .05$, for hair color; $\chi^2_\Delta = 6.12$, $p < .05$, for eye color).⁴ These main effects for hair and eye color, however, were qualified by significant Gender \times Sexual Orientation interactions ($\chi^2_\Delta = 14.10$, $p < .001$, for hair; $\chi^2_\Delta = 12.65$, $p < .001$, for eyes). More heterosexual women than men mentioned hair color, but fewer lesbians than gay men mentioned the color of their hair. Interestingly, more gay men mentioned both hair and eye color than members of any other group. (See Table 1 for the number and percentage of advertisers using physical descriptors.)

With regard to *height*, a main effect for gender obtained; more men than women mentioned height in their ads, $\chi^2_\Delta = 23.60$, $p < .001$. However, a Gender \times Sexual Orientation interaction revealed that this gender difference was much greater for homosexuals than heterosexuals, $\chi^2_\Delta = 13.99$, $p < .001$. With regard to *weight*, main effects for both gender and sexual orientation obtained ($\chi^2_\Delta = 25.64$, $p < .001$, for gender; $\chi^2_\Delta = 9.52$, $p < .01$, for sexual orientation). Men specified their weight more often than women, and homosexuals specified their weight more often than heterosexuals.

Finally, a main effect for gender indicated that men mentioned their *race* more often than women, $\chi^2_\Delta = 15.07$,

TABLE 2: Number and Percentage of Advertisers Who Offered and Solicited Characteristics in Each of Six Content Categories

Ad Contents	Heterosexual		Homosexual	
	Men (n = 75)	Women (n = 75)	Men (n = 75)	Women (n = 75)
Attractiveness offer	47 (63%)	53 (71%)	47 (63%)	42 (56%)
Attractiveness appeal	34 (45%)	34 (45%)	33 (44%)	21 (28%)
Security offer ^{ac}	40 (53%)	32 (43%)	23 (31%)	32 (43%)
Security appeal ^{bc}	4 (5%)	24 (32%)	5 (7%)	8 (11%)
Expressiveness offer	26 (35%)	23 (31%)	21 (28%)	32 (43%)
Expressiveness appeal ^b	16 (21%)	33 (44%)	12 (16%)	22 (29%)
Instrumentality offer ^b	10 (13%)	22 (29%)	14 (19%)	23 (31%)
Instrumentality appeal	11 (15%)	20 (27%)	11 (15%)	13 (17%)
Sincerity offer	12 (16%)	6 (8%)	9 (12%)	11 (15%)
Sincerity appeal ^b	9 (12%)	14 (19%)	5 (7%)	13 (17%)
Sexual offer ^a	2 (3%)	1 (1%)	21 (28%)	7 (9%)
Sexual appeal ^a	2 (3%)	2 (3%)	21 (28%)	8 (11%)

NOTE: For each content category, superscript *a* indicates a significant ($p < .05$) main effect for sexual orientation, superscript *b* indicates a significant main effect for gender, and superscript *c* indicates a significant Gender \times Sexual Orientation interaction.

$p < .001$. This may indicate a more racially heterogeneous sample of men or, alternatively, may indicate that race is a more salient characteristic for men than for women.

Content categories. To compare the present results with those of previous researchers, dichotomous variables were created to reflect whether each advertiser used at least one exemplar from each of the six categories described above. Table 2 shows the number and percentage of heterosexual and homosexual men and women advertisers who made an offer of or an appeal for at least one characteristic in each of the six content categories.

It was initially assumed that heterosexuals would be more likely than homosexuals to seek long-term relationships and marriage. A test for the difference between the two proportions revealed that, compared with homosexuals, a significantly greater proportion of heterosexuals mentioned the possibility of long-term relationships or marriage (.15 and .25 for homosexuals and heterosexuals, respectively; $z = 173.27$, $p < .0001$). Given these

predicted (and subsequently demonstrated) differences in relationship goals, it was also predicted that heterosexuals and homosexuals would differ in their use of characteristics associated with long-term relationships (i.e., financial security and sincerity). Tests for the difference between the two proportions again revealed that, compared with homosexuals, a significantly greater proportion of heterosexuals mentioned at least one exemplar from the security category (.45 and .67 for homosexuals and heterosexuals, respectively; $z = 72.94$, $p < .0001$). Moreover, compared with homosexuals, a significantly greater proportion of heterosexuals mentioned at least one exemplar from the sincerity category (.25 and .27 for homosexuals and heterosexuals, respectively; $z = 23.21$, $p < .001$). Of course, the small absolute size of this last difference is likely due to floor effects in this sample; compared to other content categories, relatively few advertisers in any group used sincerity exemplars in their ads.⁵ Still, compared with homosexuals, heterosexual advertisers were more likely to pursue long-term relationships and to use descriptors associated with such relationships.

We were also interested in differences in self-presentation strategies due to gender and to the combination of gender and sexual orientation. Therefore, for each of the 12 Content Category \times Direction (i.e., offers versus appeals) combinations in Table 2, a logistic regression was conducted.

Attractiveness and security. No main effects or interactions were found for offers of or appeals for attractiveness. However, significant effects were found for offers of and appeals for financial security. With respect to offers of financial security, a significant main effect for sexual orientation was modified by a significant Gender \times Sexual Orientation interaction, both $\chi^2_{\Delta} = 4.03$, $p < .05$. Although more heterosexuals than homosexuals offered financial security, this was true only for men; no differences were found between heterosexual and lesbian women. More women than men made appeals for financial security, $\chi^2_{\Delta} = 11.34$, $p < .001$. This main effect for gender, however, was again modified by a significant Gender \times Sexual Orientation interaction, $\chi^2_{\Delta} = 3.84$, $p < .05$. This interaction revealed that heterosexual women were more likely than members of any other group to express a desire for a financially secure partner.

Expressiveness and instrumentality. No main effects for sexual orientation or interactions between sexual orientation and gender were significant for offers of expressiveness or appeals for instrumentality. However, main effects for gender were found for instrumental offers and expressiveness appeals ($\chi^2_{\Delta} = 8.59$, $p < .01$, for instru-

mental offers; $\chi^2_{\Delta} = 11.92, p < .001$, for expressiveness appeals). More women than men sought expressive traits in their partners, and more women than men offered instrumental traits.

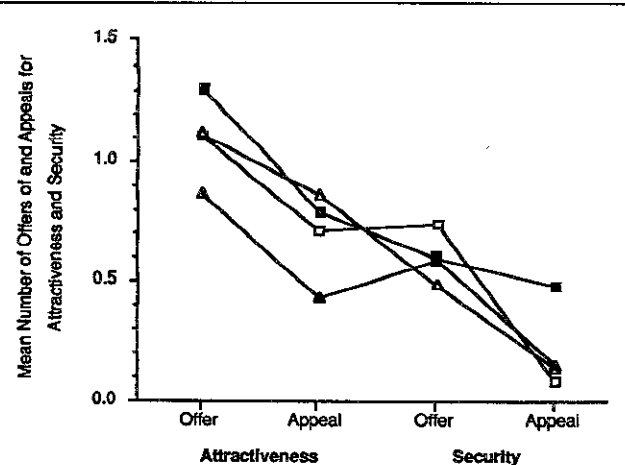
Sincerity and sexual references. More women than men sought sincere partners, $\chi^2_{\Delta} = 5.21, p < .05$. No other effects for sincerity were found. We also found main effects for sexual orientation on both sexual offers and sexual appeals ($\chi^2_{\Delta} = 20.04, p < .001$, for sexual offers; $\chi^2_{\Delta} = 19.25, p < .001$, for sexual appeals). Homosexuals were more likely than heterosexuals to mention sexual topics.

Parametric Analyses

Though comparable to the kinds of nonparametric analyses used by many previous researchers, the analyses above do not address the amount of effort each advertiser devoted to these categories. For example, dichotomous codes reflecting the mere presence of appeals for instrumentality or expressiveness do not reveal the relative number of appeals for instrumentality versus expressiveness. A more sensitive reflection of effort expended by advertisers to describe themselves or desirable partners is provided by indexes that include the absolute number of characteristics from each of the content categories contained in their ads; moreover, this more sensitive measure of effort is suitable for more statistically powerful parametric analyses.

Initially, to test whether the three regions differed from one another or interacted with any of the other variables, a $2 \times 2 \times 3 \times 2 \times 6$ repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted.⁶ The first three factors were between-subjects factors reflecting the gender and sexual orientation of advertisers (Gender, Sexual Orientation) and the geographical region (Region) whence their ads came. The fourth factor (Direction) was a within-subjects factor reflecting whether the advertiser offered or solicited a given characteristic. The fifth factor (Content Category) was also a within-subjects factor and reflected the number of words in each of six content categories (attractiveness, financial security, expressiveness, instrumentality, sexuality, and sincerity). This analysis yielded a main effect for region but no significant interactions of region with other variables, $F(2, 288) = 5.86, p < .005$. Bonferroni-protected *t* tests indicated that the number of codable terms used by advertisers in the Midwest ($M = 4.86$) and on the West Coast ($M = 5.15$) did not differ significantly but that advertisers from the East Coast ($M = 3.75$) used significantly fewer codable terms than those from either the Midwest or the West ($p < .01$).

Of course, we were less interested in differences in the total number of codable elements⁷ in the ads and more interested in gender, sexual orientation, and combina-



	Offer	Appeal	Offer	Appeal
□ Heterosexual Men	1.07	0.68	0.71	0.05
■ Heterosexual Women	1.28	0.76	0.57	0.45
△ Gay Men	1.08	0.83	0.45	0.11
▲ Lesbians	0.83	0.40	0.56	0.12

Figure 1 Mean number of offers of and appeals for attractiveness and security by heterosexual and homosexual men and women.

tions of the two as reliable predictors of ad contents. Relationships among those variables were consistent across region (i.e., the effects of region did not interact with any other variables), and Region was therefore omitted in the remaining analyses. Thus, results of analyses that follow were based on $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ (Gender \times Sexual Orientation \times Direction \times Content Category) repeated-measures ANOVAs.⁸

Attractiveness and financial security. Previous researchers using an exchange approach to personals ads have noted that heterosexual women offer attractiveness in exchange for financial security (e.g., Koestner & Wheeler, 1988) and, conversely, that heterosexual men offer financial security in exchange for attractiveness (e.g., Deaux & Hanna, 1984; Hirschman, 1987). To determine whether the current findings replicated those of previous researchers and to investigate whether a similar pattern holds for homosexual advertisers, we employed a $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ (Gender \times Sexual Orientation \times Direction \times Content Category) repeated-measures ANOVA using attractiveness and financial security as the content categories. (See Figure 1 for group means.)

A main effect for sexual orientation indicated that heterosexual advertisers used attractiveness and financial security descriptors more often than homosexual advertisers, $F(1, 296) = 6.03, p < .05$. A main effect for direction indicated that advertisers offered more attractiveness and financial security descriptors than they solicited from desired partners, $F(1, 296) = 64.44, p < .001$. A main effect for ad contents indicated that advertisers

included more attractiveness than financial security indicators, $F(1, 296) = 87.31, p < .001$. These main effects for sexual orientation, direction, and contents were, however, modified by a number of higher-order interactions.

The sexual orientation effect was modified by a significant Gender \times Sexual Orientation interaction, $F(1, 296) = 5.25, p < .05$. Specifically, the difference in the descriptors used by heterosexuals and homosexuals was significant for women but not for men, $F(1, 296) = 11.26, p < .001$, for women; $F(1, 296) = 0.01, n.s.$, for men. This interaction was further modified by an interaction among gender, sexual orientation, and ad contents, $F(1, 296) = 3.94, p < .05$. Follow-up analyses revealed that the interactive effects of gender and sexual orientation held for attractiveness descriptors, $F(1, 296) = 5.90, p < .02$, but not for security descriptors, $F(1, 296) = 0.47, n.s.$ Specifically, lesbians used fewer attractiveness descriptors than heterosexual women, $F(1, 296) = 8.25, p < .01$, whereas gay and heterosexual men did not differ in their use of attractiveness descriptors, $F(1, 296) = 0.32, n.s.$

Main effects for direction and contents were modified by a significant Gender \times Direction \times Contents interaction, $F(1, 296) = 5.55, p < .02$. This is the interaction predicted and obtained by Koestner and Wheeler (1988). However, the appropriate interpretation of this interaction in the current study differs from theirs. Men and women did not differ in the number of offers of attractiveness or financial security included in their ads, $F(1, 296) = 0.04, n.s.$, for attractiveness offers, $F(1, 296) = 0.02, n.s.$, for security offers; nor did they differ in the number of attractiveness appeals, $F(1, 296) = 2.88, n.s.$ Only one gender difference emerged: Women sought financial security more often than men did, $F(1, 296) = 4.10, p < .05$. The lack of significant effects for offers of and appeals for attractiveness suggest that attractiveness is no longer differentially addressed by men and women. Instead, attractiveness seems to be uniformly desirable for both men and women to offer and solicit.⁹

Expressiveness and instrumentality. A previously examined aspect of personals ads is the trade-off between instrumental and expressive traits (Koestner & Wheeler, 1988). In our culture, masculinity has been associated with an instrumental (Bem, 1974; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1975) or agentic (Bakan, 1966) value orientation. Such an orientation often spells a relative lack of concern about others' emotional responses, in favor of success-oriented instrumental pursuits. Femininity has typically been associated with an expressive (Bem, 1974; Spence et al., 1975) or communal (Bakan, 1966) value orientation; interpersonal concerns and socioemotional expression take precedence over instrumental pursuits and success.

To analyze these data, we conducted a $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ (Gender \times Sexual Orientation \times Direction \times Content

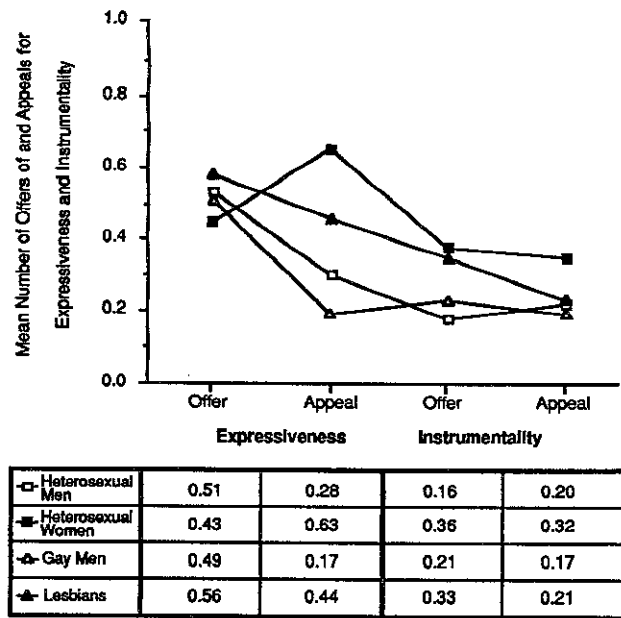


Figure 2 Mean number of offers of and appeals for expressiveness and instrumentality by heterosexual and homosexual men and women.

Category) repeated-measures ANOVA using expressiveness and instrumentality as the content categories. (See Figure 2 for group means.) Consistent with the findings of Koestner and Wheeler (1988), a main effect for ad contents indicated that advertisers mentioned expressive traits more often than they mentioned instrumental traits, $F(1, 296) = 29.28, p < .001$. Also consistent with the findings of Koestner and Wheeler, our findings revealed that advertisers offered expressive and instrumental traits more often than they solicited them, $F(1, 296) = 4.22, p < .05$. Unlike Koestner and Wheeler, however, we found a main effect for gender: Women used more expressive and instrumental descriptors than men, $F(1, 296) = 9.92, p < .01$.

Whereas Koestner and Wheeler found that these main effects were modified by both Gender \times Contents and Contents \times Direction interactions, the main effects in the current analysis were modified by a significant Gender \times Direction \times Contents interaction, $F(1, 296) = 8.03, p < .005$. Follow-up Bonferroni-protected t tests yielded results consistent with those of our nonparametric analyses: Women sought expressive traits more often than men and offered instrumental traits more often than men; $t(296) = 5.59, p < .05$, for expressive traits; $t(296) = 2.89, p < .05$, for instrumental traits. No gender differences emerged for offers of expressive traits or appeals for instrumental traits. Interestingly, although these findings are congruent with our predictions, they differ markedly from those of previous researchers. Apparently, women no longer offer caring and nurturance

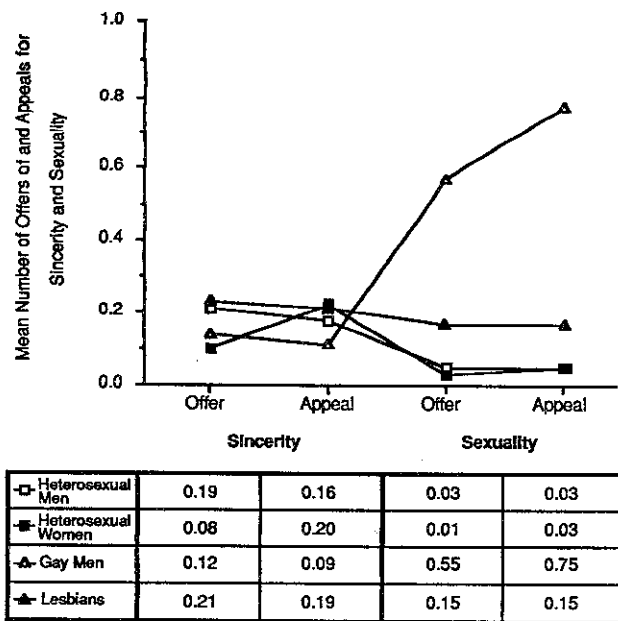


Figure 3 Mean number of offers of and appeals for sincerity and sexuality by heterosexual and homosexual men and women.

in return for competence and goal-directedness. Women now are willing to reveal (and prefer to announce) their own competence and motivation and also expect the significant others in their lives to be sensitive and affectionate rather than nondemonstrative and emotionally reserved.

Sincerity and sexual references. To examine the number of sincerity and sexual references made by homosexual and heterosexual men and women, we conducted a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ (Gender \times Sexual Orientation \times Direction \times Contents) repeated-measures ANOVA. (See Figure 3 for group means.) Significant main effects for gender, $F(1, 296) = 9.44, p < .01$, and sexual orientation, $F(1, 296) = 25.92, p < .001$, were modified by three second-order interactions: a significant Gender \times Sexual Orientation interaction, $F(1, 296) = 6.36, p < .05$; a significant Sexual Orientation \times Contents interaction, $F(1, 296) = 25.61, p < .001$; and a significant Gender \times Contents interaction, $F(1, 296) = 14.49, p < .001$. However, these two-way interactions were further modified by a significant interaction among gender, sexual orientation, and ad contents, $F(1, 296) = 17.35, p < .001$. Nested analyses revealed that the interaction between gender and sexual orientation described above obtained for sexual references but not for sincerity, $F_s(1, 296) = 21.74, p < .001$, for sexuality and 1.46, n.s., for sincerity. Bonferroni-protected *t* tests revealed that gay men's ads contained a significantly greater number of sexual references than other adver-

tisers' (all *t*s $> 3.8, p$ s $< .01$); further, none of the other three groups of advertisers differed from one another (all *t*s $< 1, n.s.$). This is not to suggest that all homosexual men's relationships are based solely on sexual activities; it is to suggest that personals ads are often vehicles for arranging such encounters.

Nonparametric Versus Parametric Analyses

Overall, nonparametric and parametric analyses revealed similar patterns in advertisers' strategies. Not only did more women—heterosexual women in particular—than men solicit indicators of security in their ads, but women—again, heterosexual women in particular—included more of such security appeals, on the average, than men. With regard to expressiveness and instrumentality concerns manifested in ads, again, parametric and nonparametric analyses yielded similar results. More women than men included at least one appeal for expressive traits, and women's ads included more expressive appeals, on the average, than men's ads. More women than men offered instrumental traits; women's ads also included more of such references, on the average, than men's. Finally, not only were homosexuals significantly more likely than heterosexuals to include at least one sexual reference in their ads, but the ads written by gay men in particular contained more of such references, on the average, than the ads of other advertisers.

Of course, results of nonparametric analyses did not map perfectly onto results of parametric analyses. Specifically, although nonparametric analyses of attractiveness descriptors did not reveal significant differences in the numbers of advertisers in each of the four groups who mentioned attractiveness descriptors, parametric analyses revealed interactive effects of gender and sexual orientation on the number of attractiveness descriptors in ads. That is, although lesbians included fewer attractiveness descriptors than heterosexual women, gay and heterosexual men did not differ in the number of attractiveness descriptors included in their ads. Moreover, with regard to sincerity indicators and sexual references, the picture revealed by parametric analyses was far more complex than that revealed by nonparametric analyses. Whereas the nonparametric analysis revealed only that homosexuals were more likely than heterosexuals to mention sexual topics, the parametric analysis revealed a significant interaction. That is, although gay men were not significantly more likely to mention sexual topics at least once, they were more likely to make repeated references to sexuality if they mentioned it at all.

Recall that a secondary goal of this investigation was to compare the results of parametric and nonparametric analyses. The foregoing inconsistencies in parametric and nonparametric results are suggestive of the condi-

tional superiority of one data-analytic strategy over the other; results of these two kinds of inferential analyses did not reveal one to be uniformly superior to the other in revealing gender and sexual orientation differences in advertising strategies. Rather, they pointed to the importance of considering two factors in the choice of a data-analytic strategy: (a) the number of advertisers in the groups of interest who mention a given exemplar of a content category at least once and (b) between-group variance in the number of such exemplars contained in ads. When there is little between-group variance in the average number of exemplars contained in ads, nonparametric analyses may be more informative than parametric analyses. For example, in the current study, although significantly more women than men made at least one appeal for characteristics suggestive of sincerity, their ads did not contain a significantly greater number of such appeals, for sincerity references were relatively sparse overall. However, when there is sufficient between-group variance in the average number of exemplars, parametric analyses may reveal significant patterns in the data that would be overlooked using nonparametric statistics. Again, in the current study, although gay men were not significantly more likely than members of other groups to include at least one sexual reference in their ads, when they did include sexual references, they used more, on the average, than other advertisers. Thus, longer ads containing a greater number of codable elements—and greater potential for variability in responses—may be more suitable for parametric analyses, whereas more telegraphic ads may be more suitable for nonparametric analyses.

DISCUSSION

In personals ads, advertisers describe themselves as potential relationship partners and frequently describe their "ideal" man or woman. The contents of these ads are not randomly generated; men and women use systematic strategies to manage an impression and attract desirable others. Although this and previous research provides support for exchange theory, the picture is more complicated than is apparent at first blush, for the "commodities" worthy of exchange reflect gender stereotypes, norms, and values of different subcultures and, of course, the nature of the relationship that advertisers seek. Consequently, ad contents are associated not only with the gender of the advertiser but also with his or her sexual orientation. In fact, inclusion of both homosexual and heterosexual men and women in this study revealed that it is not always the case that women in general differ from men or that heterosexuals in general differ from homosexuals in terms of the ads they write. Rather, ads

are often a function of both advertiser and target gender taken together (i.e., the interaction of gender and sexual orientation). In fact, with one exception (nonparametric analyses of the number of advertisers who mentioned sexual descriptors), sexual orientation did not predict ad contents independent of gender.

Heterosexual men and women typically use personals ads to pursue relationships expected to last over the long haul. With that goal in mind, they are careful to include mention of desirable characteristics that contribute to relationship longevity. Specifically, because many long-term heterosexual relationships include the promise of marriage and family, men and women are well advised to find partners who are unlikely to be exploitative; they are also well advised to consider practical issues such as financial security and occupational stability. Not surprisingly, heterosexuals in the current study were more likely than homosexuals to pursue enduring relationships (e.g., Deaux & Hanna, 1984). Of the six content categories included in this study, sincerity and financial security were two characteristics more predictive than others of enduring relationships, and as expected, heterosexuals were significantly more likely than homosexuals to offer, solicit, or both offer and solicit markers of security, although relatively few advertisers overall mentioned sincerity.

The power of gender stereotypes to shape ad contents is reflected in the strategies of heterosexuals. Seeking enduring relationships and likely to earn less than the average man, heterosexual women are more likely than other advertisers to seek a partner who is financially secure. The ads of heterosexual men were complementary; seeking enduring relationships, (generally) earning more, and expected to provide, heterosexual men are very likely to respond to women's solicitations by extending offers of occupational and financial stability.

Norms and values unique to a subculture are also predictive of advertising strategies. Lesbians often eschew traditional notions of attractiveness as a criterion for desirability in a relationship partner. Hence, they are less likely than heterosexual women to specify attractiveness as a preferred characteristic in a partner, and given the relative devaluation of attractiveness, they do not feel as compelled as heterosexual women (attempting to attract men, who often *do* solicit attractiveness) to claim to be attractive. Finally, not all men included sexual references in their ads. However, homosexual men, more likely than other advertisers to pursue transient relationships in which sexual activities play a central role, are very likely to include such references in advertising for a partner and to emphasize sexual and physical dimensions of attractiveness. Thus, lesbians seem unique in their lack of concern for matters of physical and social

attractiveness, and homosexual men seem unique in their concern for sexual matters (see also Deaux & Hanna, 1984). Such idiosyncrasies (which may be expected on the basis of stereotypes) would not reveal themselves were researchers to limit their attention to ads written by men to women or by women to men.

Surprisingly, men and women advertisers in the current study did not differ in the importance they placed on attractiveness, whether in describing themselves or a desirable partner. These null findings are at odds with other research in the personals domain, research that has demonstrated that men are more likely than women to solicit attractiveness (e.g., Deaux & Hanna, 1984; Feingold, 1990; Harrison & Saeed, 1977; Hirschman, 1987; Koestner & Wheeler, 1988) and that women are more likely than men to offer attractiveness (e.g., Harrison & Saeed, 1977; Hirschman, 1987; Koestner & Wheeler, 1988). What might be the source of our failure to detect gender differences in the importance advertisers attach to attractiveness? Perhaps today neither men nor women view attractiveness as particularly important for the initiation and maintenance of relationships and therefore devote more effort to addressing other (more important) determinants of relationship quality. Data in the current study do not support this speculation; in fact, references to attractiveness appeared twice as often in ads as references to any other content category. Thus, it does not appear that men and women place comparably little emphasis on attractiveness; rather, it appears that men and women place comparably great emphasis on this characteristic in soliciting a dating or relationship partner.

Although our null findings contradict previous findings in the personals domain, other research in social psychology suggests that attractiveness assumes an important role for both men and women. For example, Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, and Rottmann (1966) found that physical attractiveness was the only significant predictor of how much individuals attending a "computer dating dance" were liked; moreover, this was true for both men and women. A more recent investigation also revealed that, compared with other information, attractiveness information was the most powerful determinant of both men's and women's attraction to another (Sprecher, 1989). Additionally, although attractiveness information was not differentially influential for men and women, when asked directly, men were more likely than women to acknowledge the role such information played in their ratings. Apparently, as Berscheid (1985) has noted, attractiveness was and continues to be a salient commodity in the search for dating and relationship partners. And as revealed in the current study, neither men nor women hesitate to express the importance

they attach to attractiveness, as (indirectly) revealed by the contents of the personals ads they compose.

In conclusion, personals ads provide a rich source of archival data reflecting advertisers' self-presentation strategies, gender stereotypes, and social forces that affect interpersonal relationships. These data are valuable for a number of reasons. The population of advertisers is far more heterogeneous than the population from which the typical research subject is drawn. Personals ads therefore allow researchers to examine the relationship interests of a much wider array of people than the proverbial college sophomore most frequently studied. In addition, the use of personals ads avoids artifacts. When subjects are aware that they are the objects of study in impression management or self-presentation research, we cannot be sure to what extent they are managing their impressions for us, the researchers, and to what extent for others. In personals ads, we know whom the advertisers are trying to impress—and it is not we researchers.

Nor need personals ads be limited to correlational research. Experimental manipulations could easily be used to test hypotheses about the effectiveness of various self-presentational styles. With relative ease, the imaginative researcher could compose several systematically varied ads to simulate the prototypical personals section of a weekly periodical. For example, one might test the prediction that the most appealing heterosexual men are those who offer financial security and expressive traits and who solicit independent, ambitious partners. Ads in which these dimensions (financial security, expressiveness, instrumentality) and their complements are systematically varied can be embedded among other ads that allegedly compose a personals section. Men and women research participants can then rate the appeal of the ads or guess who wrote them. In fact, respondents' evaluations of systematically varied ads will capture their gender stereotypes indirectly, and their written replies to such ads will reflect self-presentation strategies. Such experimental manipulations afford the researcher the opportunity to augment correlational studies with data reflecting causal relationships. In addition, one nonexperimental approach to the use of personals ads is to examine the response rates of existing ads. This technique has been fruitfully employed by Lynn and Shurgot (1984) and Rajecski, Bledsoe, and Rasmussen (1991). Together, results of such experimental and nonexperimental research can provide for ecologically valid causal statements about the determinants of self-presentation strategies as manifested in personals ads and about the predictors of their success in attracting others.

Finally, personals ads reflect the concerns, preferences, and self-presentation strategies of advertisers in

any given location and at any given time. They also reflect the effects of social forces. Today—in contrast to 20 years ago—neither homosexual nor heterosexual advertisers can afford to ignore the spread of AIDS among sexually active persons. In some cases, this epidemic may spell changes in the kinds of relationships advertisers seek to establish. In other cases, although it may not spell changes in advertisers' relationship goals, the AIDS epidemic may yield attempts to confront the dangers of that fatal disease head-on. In our sample, for example, a large number of gay men specified their HIV status (HIV positive, HIV negative), allowing prospective partners to make informed decisions about whether to pursue a sexual relationship. It is likely that increases in the number of fatalities among people with AIDS will influence not only the number of people who use personals ads to meet prospective partners but also the contents of the ads they compose. More generally, changes in the contents of personals ads can provide the keen-eyed investigator with a reflection of relationship-related social changes as they unfold.

NOTES

1. Although Laner and her colleagues have attempted to remedy this problem, Laner (1978) omitted lesbians, and although Laner and Kamel (1977) compared heterosexual and homosexual men and women, data from homosexuals were taken from the work of Cameron, Oskamp, and Sparks (1977). Moreover, the majority of Laner and Kamel's (1977) statistical analyses compared only two groups of advertisers at a time, rather than all four groups simultaneously, thus contributing to alpha inflation and Type I error.

2. These sources reflected publications targeted to both homosexuals and heterosexuals (e.g., *The Village Voice*, *The Twin Cities Reader*, *The Chicago Reader*) and publications targeted primarily to lesbians and gay men (e.g., *The New York Native*, *Gay Chicago*, *Coming Up*). Methodological purists will probably note that different self-presentation strategies may reflect publication effects rather than sexual orientation effects—that is, that the sexual orientation of advertisers may be confounded with ad source. For example, the ads of gay men published in such sources as *The New York Native* are more graphic and sexually explicit than ads placed by homosexuals and heterosexuals in such relatively sedate sources as *The Twin Cities Reader*. We did not deem it necessary, however, to unconfound ad source and sexual orientation. First, we exhaustively sampled our generous supply of publications in which both homosexuals and heterosexuals placed ads, only to find a paucity of ads placed by lesbians and gay men; and in the interest of learning how lesbians and gay men presented themselves, we chose to read where they chose to advertise. Second—on a more subtle methodological note—as Meehl (1971) observed, such “nuisance” or “confounding” variables do not necessarily lead to spurious results, and whether such variables should be eliminated (e.g., by matching for ad source in this study) or statistically controlled in archival research hinges on researchers' “causal presuppositions” (p. 147). Our causal presupposition reflects the belief that homosexual publications tend to be more graphic or sexually explicit because homosexuals—gay men in particular—target publications that are open to their “racier” means of expression. Finally, we echo Meehl's (1970) caveats concerning the methodological or statistical control of potentially confounding nuisance variables. One problem Meehl notes is that of “systematic unmatching” (1970, p. 376). Briefly, a procedure in which pairs are matched on some nuisance variable (e.g., ad source in the current study) yields an artificial non-random sample of the population of interest and can lead to systematic

“unmatching” on additional unidentified nuisance variables. A second problem inherent in controlling for nuisance variables (e.g., ad source) is that of “unrepresentative subpopulations” (Meehl, 1970, p. 379). Using matched samples drawn from a population is likely to yield sample characteristics that differ greatly from the parameters of the populations to which researchers wish to generalize. Therefore, in the interest of preventing more subtle systematic biases introduced by matching for ad source, and in the interest of enhancing the ecological validity of this study, we have chosen to exercise the methodologically “impure” option of allowing sexual orientation and ad source to vary freely in this sample of personals advertisers.

3. The complete master list contained over 225 terms and can be obtained from the authors on request.

4. More specifically, χ^2_{Δ} reflects a change in χ^2 comparing the full model (including both main effects and the interaction) with the reduced model that omits the effect tested for significance.

5. Compared with advertisers studied by Deaux and Hanna (1984), a smaller percentage of advertisers in our sample mentioned indicators of sincerity. With the threat of AIDS and the growing concern about the hazards of casual or unsafe sex, advertisers might be expected to manifest more motivation to find dating partners who will remain faithful, honest, and sincere. This appears not to be the case.

6. There was no a priori reason to expect ad contents from the three geographical regions to differ; three samples were used simply to enhance the generalizability of our findings. However, although we expected no regional effects or interactions of region with other predictor variables, we chose to test for such effects. The interaction of region with other predictors of ad contents would, of course, have necessitated qualifications in descriptions of the relationships among gender, sexual orientation, and advertising strategies.

7. There is one potential problem inherent in studies in which one dependent variable is, in essence, defined by another. On one hand, it is reasonable to say that the number of codable elements in the ad was a function of the length of the ad; on the other hand, it is also reasonable to say that the length of the ad was a function of the codable elements included therein. In our minds, the latter assertion seemed more reasonable; that is, what people intend to communicate determines how they will do it (i.e., how many words they use). However, because the number of codable elements and the total number of words contained in the ads were highly—though not perfectly—correlated ($r = .64$), we used hierarchical analyses to regress ad length (total words), first, on total codable elements and, second, on the main and interactive effects of gender and sexual orientation. Codable elements accounted for a significant proportion of the variance in ad length (42%), $F(1, 298) = 211.43, p < .0001$. Gender, sexual orientation, and the interaction of the two accounted for only an additional 1% of the variance in ad length above and beyond that explained by codable elements. Although this was a statistically significant increase ($p = .049$), it was not of any practical significance. Had advertisers in one or another group included more exemplars from certain content categories simply because they used more words, the predictor variables and their interactions would have accounted for a substantial increase in the variance in total words above and beyond that explained by total codable elements. They did not.

8. A $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ (Gender \times Sexual Orientation \times Direction \times Content Category) repeated-measures analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) using the total number of words in each ad as the covariate yielded results consistent with the analysis without the covariate. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) also yielded results consistent with the repeated-measures ANOVA. We opted to report results of the ANOVA because they are more straightforward and familiar and because there is no follow-up procedure universally deemed appropriate for multivariate analyses (see Huberty & Morris, 1989).

9. There is, however, an alternative explanation for our results. It may be that our failure to find differences between men and women is due to the inclusion of socially attractive terms in our definition of the attractiveness category. To determine whether this was the case, we recoded all the ads that mentioned attractiveness. We found very few social attractiveness terms; indeed, of the 520 attractiveness indicators coded, 11 (2%) were offers of or appeals for socially attractive charac-

teristics. Not surprisingly, when the data were reanalyzed with social attractiveness exemplars omitted, the findings were consistent with those reported above (i.e., the Gender \times Contents \times Direction interaction is still significant, $F(1, 296) = 5.54, p < .02$).

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