

# Selling yourself and procuring another: Investigating gender differences in NZ dating advertisements

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## Abstract

Twelve hypotheses were generated concerning predicted sex differences in NZ dating advertisements, based on consistently reported findings from research examining gender differences in overseas dating advertisements. A sample of dating advertisements from two local Canterbury newspapers (N= 153) were content-analysed. Eight out of 12 of these hypotheses found some empirical support from this study. Female advertisers in this NZ sample offered their weight more often than males did, sought cues to financial security more often than males did, stipulated height more often than males did, and sought partners that were their own age or older more often than males did. Male advertisers in this NZ sample stipulated weight and offered their height more often than females did. NZ male advertisers also revealed their age more often than females did and sought partners that were their own age or younger more often than females did. These findings support the prediction that many of the gender differences reported in overseas dating advertisement research would be present in this sample of NZ dating advertisements.

## 1. Introduction

For many years 7<sup>th</sup> Formers in New Zealand high schools have had the topic *The Language of Advertising* available to them for Bursary English. But it is only relatively recently that they could have used as data an advertisement such as the following:

OVERLY SERIOUS, obsequious, tractable man, trim and fit, 40,  
handsome, uni lecturer, seeks clever, intelligent, spunky woman  
with pretty feet, to love, worship and obey.

What kinds of linguistic artefacts are such advertisements? The sales pitch used in this dating advertisement, which appeared in the 'Look Who's Talking' column in the *Christchurch Star*, September 1 1999, is a cleverly contrived mixture of self-aggrandisement and self-deprecation. The advertiser is clearly flaunting his ability to be pretentious. However, all humour and florid language aside, this advertisement clearly describes the gender and occupation of the advertiser, his age, gives a flattering description of his appearance and build, and lists a number of features that he requires in the woman that he is attempting to procure. Fifty percent of these requisite features are related to her physical appearance. While this advertisement may be more amusing than most, it has many features in common with many other dating advertisements. Justine Coupland (1996:189) describes these advertisements as 'the textual products of commodification and marketization.' She views them as 'a prime site for witnessing the textual construction of self- and other-identities in the service of developing new relationships.'

During the 1980s, dating advertising gained acceptance amongst a diverse set of users (Jagger, 1998). Dating advertisements, which Baig (1985:60) has described as 'once the province of the obscene and psychotic', now appear in a multitude of magazines and newspapers, and self-advertising as a means of meeting prospective partners has dramatically increased in many countries, including the United States and Britain.

This increase in the use of dating advertisements as a method of meeting partners can either be described negatively as being 'symbolic of the loneliness and alienation of society in general', or more positively as 'a healthy and innovative adaption [sic] to rapid social change' (Bolig, Stein, & McKenry, 1984: 587). Coupland (1996:190) argues that these 'commodified self-presentations' can be viewed as 'relationally efficient and a 'natural' response' to the work-centred, time-pressured and mass-mediated circumstances of modern life (Coupland, 1996: 190).

Despite differing theoretical approaches, most of the dating advertising research up until now has been based on content analyses of written dating advertisements, and has concentrated on examining gender differences. The research findings regarding such gender differences in the UK and USA have been extremely consistent. The most consistently reported gender differences have been that women offered attractiveness and looked for financial security, whilst men sought attractiveness and offered financial security (Cameron, Oskamp, & Sparks, 1977; Harrison & Saeed, 1977; Deaux & Hanna, 1984; Koestner & Wheeler, 1988). Deaux and Hanna (1984) found that men were more likely to both offer and to request physical characteristics other than attractiveness. Another gender difference that has often been reported is that women have tended to seek older men, while men have often sought younger women (Cameron et al., 1977; Harrison & Saeed, 1977). Montini & Ovrebo (1990) reported that dating advertisements that were written by men offered and stipulated age more often than those written by women did. Gender differences regarding height and weight are not as clear, but Bolig et al. (1984) found that men were more likely to provide height and weight. Cameron et al. (1977) found that men often asked for short or medium-height women, whilst women often asked for tall men. Koestner and Wheeler (1988) found that women in their sample tended to offer weight and seek height, whilst men offered their height and sought weight.

So how do kiwis commodify themselves in dating advertisements? As there has been no previous research conducted in this area in NZ, this pilot study investigated whether a selection of the gender differences that have been consistently found in overseas dating advertisements research were also present in NZ dating advertisements. If we are like overseas advertisers then:

1. Women, more than men, would advertise traits that describe physical appearance;
2. Men, more than women, would seek traits that describe physical appearance;
3. Men, more than women, would advertise their height.
4. Women, more than men, would seek height.
5. Women, more than men, would advertise their weight.

6. Men, more than women, would seek weight.
7. Men, more than women, would offer financial security.
8. Women, more than men, would seek financial security.
9. Men, more than women, would reveal their age.
10. Men, more than women, would stipulate age.
11. Women, more than men, would seek partners that are their own age or older.
12. Men, more than women, would seek partners that are their own age or younger.

Out of interest, I also decided to investigate possible gender differences with regards to the revelation or stipulation of ethnicity and/or nationality, and with regards to the revelation or stipulation of marital status. Dating advertisements published in two local Christchurch newspapers were used as the data for this study.

## 2. Method

### Subjects

All dating advertisement that appeared in the 'Personals' column of *The Press*, a Canterbury daily newspaper, on the 4 and 11 September 1999, and the 'Look Who's Talking' column of the *Christchurch Star*, a twice-weekly free Canterbury newspaper, on the 1 and 9 of September 1999, were collected.

### Procedure

This collection of dating advertisements was then screened in order to obtain a usable sample. Criteria for rejecting dating advertisements from this initial group were:

1. Advertisements that were placed by more than one person.
2. Advertisements in which the gender of either the seeker or the sought was not clear.
3. Advertisements that sought persons of the same sex as the advertiser.
4. Advertisements that were repeated (only one copy of each advertisement was allowed in the final sample).

As a result of this screening process, 153 of the dating advertisements that appeared in these two publications (38 placed by women aged 22-55 years and 115 placed by men aged 18-65) were used. These advertisements were coded either by using frequency scores for certain descriptors of traits, as in the case of physical appearance or financial security, or dichotomously, where an attribute was marked as being either present or absent, as in the case of marital status, ethnicity/ nationality and age. The frequency scores that were obtained for physical appearance and financial security were also transformed into present-absent dichotomous scores so that chi-square analyses could be conducted on these. Traits sought and traits offered were coded separately, according to the following criteria:

1. *Physical appearance.* All positive or neutral descriptions of general appearance, e.g. attractive, easy on the eye. All height and weight revelations and stipulations were coded.
2. *Financial security.* Any reference to financial resources and possessions, income (actual or potential), work, or profession, e.g. working, financially secure, professional, successful, good job, good wheels.
3. *Marital status.* Any of three categories denoting this: any reference to being married (e.g. bored husband), attached, or single (e.g. divorced, widow, separated).
4. *Ethnicity/nationality.* Any specific reference made to this e.g. white, Maori, European, Asian, Dutch, New Zealand citizen.
5. *Age.* For analysis purposes, vague references to age were averaged (i.e., mid-30s=35, early 30s=32.5, late 30s=37.5, 30-40=35). Very vague references to age, such as 50ish, were ignored. When age was stipulated, advertisers often gave a range of ages, so in these cases, the midpoint of any range given was used. The stipulated and revealed ages were compared to allow coding of age preferences as 'same age and younger', or 'same age and older.'

### Analysis

Using Statistica 98, independent *t*-tests were conducted for frequency scores and chi-squared tests were conducted for dichotomous measures. These tests established whether the sex differences were statistically significant. The effect size ( $\phi$  coefficient) was computed for each chi-square test. Effect sizes simply assess the magnitude of the sex difference. A small effect size was set at  $\phi > 0.2$ , a medium effect size was set at  $\phi > 0.3-0.4$ , and a large effect size was set at  $\phi > 0.4$  (Cohen, 1969).

### 3. Results

#### Physical Appearance (Hypotheses 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6)

Although Table 2(a) indicates that women offered information about their physical appearance more often than men did, this difference was not statistically significant. A *t*-test for independent means, which compared the mean number of times men and women advertised their physical appearance, revealed the same result. As indicated by the frequency means in Table 1, women offered their physical appearance only slightly more often than men did.

Table 2(a) reveals that both men and women were seeking attributes related to physical appearance to a similar degree. As Table 1 indicates, this result was also repeated in an independent means *t*-test, which revealed that the mean number of times men and women stipulated traits concerned with physical appearance was almost identical.

Table 1. Frequency Means and Standard Deviations of Offered and Stipulated Traits

	Females (N=38)		Males (N=115)		t-Value	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
<i>Physical Appearance:</i>						
Offered	1.079	1.049	0.939	1.223	-.06	n.s.
Sought	0.605	1.001	0.617	1.046	.06	n.s.
<i>Financial Security:</i>						
Offered	0.447	0.685	0.426	0.652	.17	n.s.
Sought	0.342	0.582	0.043	0.204	4.71	<.001

Advertisements revealing or stipulating height or weight were also analysed. Table 2(a) reveals that significantly more men than women mentioned their height. This sex difference was reversed with the seeking of height. As Table 2(a) reveals, significantly more women than men sought height. The effect sizes were small however. As Table 2(a) reveals, significantly more women than men in this sample indicated their weight. This sex difference was reversed with regards to seeking partners of a particular weight. Men were significantly more likely to seek this particular attribute than women were. However, as Table 2(a) reveals, the effect sizes were small.

### Financial security (Hypotheses 7 and 8)

As Table 2(b) indicates, women offered financial security cues as self-descriptors to a slightly larger extent than men did, although this difference was not statistically significant. As indicated by Table 1, an independent means *t*-test obtained the same result.

Table 2(b) indicates that a significantly higher proportion of women stipulated cues to financial security than men did. The medium effect size indicates that that this sex difference was sizeable. Table 1 reveals that this sex difference also emerged in the mean number of times men and women stipulated financial security cues. This difference was highly statistically significant.

### Marital Status

As indicated by Table 2 (c), men revealed their marital status more often than women did. This difference was not statistically significant however. As Table 2 (c) reveals, women stipulated marital status slightly more often than men did, although this difference was also not statistically significant.

### Ethnicity/Nationality

As Table 2(d) reveals, women revealed their ethnicity/nationality slightly more often than men did, although this difference was not statistically

significant. Men stipulated ethnicity/nationality slightly more often than women did, although again this difference was not statistically significant.

Table 2. Comparisons of Advertisers, by Sex, Offering and Seeking Coded Traits

		Females (N=38)		Males (N=115)		$\chi^2$	<i>p</i>	$\phi$
		N	%	N	%			
<b>(a)Physical Appearance:</b>								
Height	Offered	24	63	55	48	2.69	n.s.	0.14
	Sought	13	34	43	37	.12	n.s.	0.03
Weight	Offered	3	12a	27	49a	4.4	<.05	0.16
	Sought	7	54a	5	12a	7.83	<.05	0.23
	Offered	16	67a	22	40a	8.08	<.05	0.23
	Sought	2	15a	30	70a	7.49	<.05	0.22
<b>(b)Financial Security:</b>								
	Offered	13	34	38	33	.02	n.s.	0.01
	Sought	11	29	5	4	18.34	<.001	0.35
<b>(c)Marital Status:</b>								
	Revealed	11	29	45	39	.00	n.s.	0.00
	Married	0		2	4a			
	Attached	0		2	4a			
	Single	11	100a	42	93a			
	Stipulated	12	32	32	28	.20	n.s.	0.04
	Married	0		0				
	Attached	0		0				
	Single	12	100a	29	91a			
<b>(d)Ethnicity/ Nationality</b>								
	Revealed	12	32	33	29	.11	n.s.	0.08
	Stipulated	5	13	22	19	.70	n.s.	0.08
<b>(e)Age</b>								
	Revealed	29	76	104	90	5.01	<.05	0.18
	Exact age offered	25	86a	83	80a	.56	n.s.	0.06
	Stipulated	24	63	59	51	.97	n.s.	0.08
	Same age and younger	4	17a	36	61a	27.31	<.001	0.40
	Same age and older	13	54a	4	7a	6.39	<.05	0.20

a% of advertisers mentioning trait.

### Age (Hypotheses 9,10, 11 and 12)

Of those advertisers who revealed their age, the mean age of males was 38.1 years, and for females it was 38.9 years. As Table 2(e) indicates, men revealed their age significantly more often than women did, however, the effect size is small. As indicated by Table 2(e), women offered their exact age slightly more often than men did, although this difference was not statistically significant. Table 2(e) reveals that age was stipulated slightly more often by women than men, although this difference was not statistically significant. As revealed by Table 2(e), men sought partners that were their age or younger significantly more often than women did, and in this case, there is a medium effect size.

Women, however, sought partners that were their age or older significantly more often than men did, however, the effect size is small.

#### **4. Discussion**

On the basis of this data and these results we can see that kiwis, no less than Americans and the British, have gender-related preferences for how they advertise themselves and for prospective partners. Of the 12 possibilities for similarity, eight gained empirical support from this study. Female advertisers in this NZ sample offered their weight more often than men did (Hypothesis 5), sought cues to financial security more often than men did (Hypothesis 8), stipulated height more often than men did (Hypothesis 4), and sought partners that were their own age or older more often than men did (Hypothesis 11). Male advertisers in this NZ sample stipulated weight more often than women did (Hypothesis 6), and offered their height more often than women did (Hypothesis 3). Males also revealed their age more often than women did (Hypothesis 9), and sought partners that were their own age or younger more often than women did (Hypothesis 12). These commonalities may, however, result from our advertising practices being borrowed from overseas. This importation may also explain why one male advertiser appears to unwittingly describe his marital status twice, as a 'single SWM' (unless the abbreviated S in this advertisement stands for something other than single — perhaps seductive, skinny, stupid, shallow or sleazy?).

Given the possibilities for importing conventions, it is more interesting to examine the ways that kiwi dating ads were different from overseas ones. This is all the more so since these hypotheses were generated from overseas research findings that were remarkably consistent, despite the differing theoretical approaches that had been taken by various researchers. It is therefore interesting that female and male advertisers in this NZ sample do not significantly differ in terms of their overall offering or seeking of traits that describe physical appearance. This may well lend support to Featherstone's (1982) argument that the current emphasis on the body's ability to be infinitely perfected and on its preservation, may now mean that physical attractiveness is not only something that is considered important for women, but in fact it may now have become very important for men. Featherstone (1982) contends that idealisations of slimness, beauty, youth and fitness are now promoted as universal consumer images of attractiveness. It may be that when marketing themselves, both male and female NZ dating advertisers see their bodies as important markers of identity.

This study's findings did not support the hypothesis that NZ men, more than women, would offer more cues to financial security. In fact these NZ women advertisers offered slightly more cues to financial security than their male counterparts. This finding may well lend support to Jagger's (1998) suggestion that the way women and men advertise themselves will become more similar as their roles within relationships become more similar (especially with regards to their respective financial contributions).

Purely out of interest, this study investigated revelations and stipulations of both ethnicity/nationality and marital status, to see whether any gender

differences were evident with regards to these attributes. Sex differences in revelation and stipulation of ethnicity/ nationality were not evident in this sample of NZ dating advertisements. This study also did not reveal significant gender differences in revelation or stipulation of marital status in this NZ sample.

The differences between this Canterbury sample and overseas dating advertisements are rather interesting, especially with regards to the seeking and offering of physical attributes, and the offering of cues to financial security. Gender differences were not found with regards to these categories in this sample, yet they were consistently found in overseas research. It would be useful to see whether these findings bear any resemblance to results from dating advertising research that may be being currently undertaken in other countries. It may be that these gender similarities in NZ dating advertisements are a recent trend that is also occurring elsewhere in the world, or they may be something that is peculiar to NZ dating advertisements. However, these particular results are consistent with a recent study of New Zealand University students that found that men and women gave equal weight to physical attractiveness and vitality as important factors associated with their ideal mates (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 1999).

Being in the nature of a pilot, this study is suggestive only, and further research is required before more substantive claims can be made with regards to gender differences in NZ dating advertisements. Limitations of this study include the fact that the sample size was quite small, and that the advertisements came from just one region of NZ. However, NZ dating advertising has provided an interesting opportunity to study one textual form of New Zealand English, and to compare the local product with overseas examples.

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