

Seeking Love Online: A Cross-cultural Examination of Personal Advertisements

on American and Chinese Dating Websites

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Abstract: This cross-cultural study explored the role of culture and gender in mate selection. Through content analyzing two hundred Chinese personal advertisements and two hundred American personal advertisements posted on Chinese and American dating websites, the study found that culture had significant impact on patterns of self-presentation and mate preference. More Chinese advertisers provided information on their physical appearances, health conditions, financial status, education, and morality, whereas more American advertisers wrote about their personality and hobbies. A similar pattern was found in their statements about mate preferences: statement about physical characteristics, financial status and morality more frequently appeared in Chinese personal ads, and statements about personality and hobbies more frequently occurred in American personal ads. Results also revealed some gender differences. Particularly, Chinese

women were more likely to write about their own personalities, moralities, and physical characteristics than Chinese men.

Key words: mate selection, online dating, self-presentation, cross-cultural analysis

Personal advertisements are inseparable components of many print media (Vičková, 1996). The aim of personal ads is not only to provide information about advertisers' personal features and their mate preferences but also to mediate personal contact. Therefore, advertisers need to carefully deliberate what they want to include in their ads. Many studies have used personal ads as sources of data to explore the pattern of mate selection and other issues of romantic relationships (e.g., Cameron, Oskamp, & Sparks, 1977; Campos, Otta, & Siqueira, 2002; Sev'er, 1990). As Sev'er (1990) stresses, personal ads contain sufficient information that reflects trend of mate choice, and thus they deserve systematic studies. Previous research of personal ads has linked declarations on ads with gender (e.g., Cameron et al., 1977; Pawlowski & Dunbar, 1999), age (e.g., Pawlowski & Dunbar, 1999; Sev'er, 1990), and many other personal factors.

Few studies have examined the impact of culture on mate selection patterns as reflected by personal ads. As an exploratory cross-cultural investigation, the present study content analyzed 200 Chinese personal ads and 200 American personal ads posted on four dating websites (Two websites developed in Mainland China and two in the United States). According to Strassberg and Holty (2003), more personal ads have migrated to the Internet in the last decade. Similar to personal ads published in print media, online personal ads also usually include advertisers' self-descriptions, qualities that they expect their prospective mates to possess, and the type of relationship that they desire. Through examining the information that people disclosed in these ads, the study explored the role of culture and gender in the mate selection procedure.

Personal Ads: Impression Formation and Mate Selection

Personal ads are pieces of communication that the writer addresses to an unknown “ideal” reader (Vičková, 1996). One important part of personal ads is self-presentation through which the advertiser intends to establish a positive self-image. The self-presentation in personal ads may affect how readers perceive the advertiser and their willingness to contact him or her (Campos et al., 2002). According to Goffman (1959), one means of controlling how other people respond to us is to optimize the impression we give others about ourselves. Impression management is normally viewed as one person trying to influence positively others’ perceptions (Rao, Schmidt, & Murray, 1995). Individuals may purposely manage their impressions based on the expected preference of the message receiver. For example, Zanna and Pack (1975) found that, when led to believe that a desirable man preferred traditional women, female participants manipulated their self-presentation to appear more stereotypically feminine than they had previously described themselves.

Evidence has also shown that the description of one’s personal characteristics does influence others’ perception of him or her. In a study conducted by Keisling and Gynther (1993), men perceived physically unattractive and average women described as affectionate and compassionate as more attractive than those described as independent and assertive. When people are composing their personal ads, since they usually do not know the reader, they tend to describe themselves based on the stereotypical beliefs of the society. For instance, men may be more likely to make reference to their occupational status than women because they believe their prospective mates will make a judgment of them based on their jobs (Sev’er, 1990). Therefore, how advertisers describe themselves in ads actually reflects their beliefs on mate selections.

Another important component of personal ads is qualities that the advertiser is looking for in others. Such information can directly demonstrate people’s mate preferences. Previous studies

have suggested that mate selection strategies are subject to many factors. For instance, Pawlowski and Dunbar (1999) found that how demanding advertisers were in their mate search criteria was determined by their own “market value.” Women’s “market value” peaks in their twenties, whereas men’s “market value” peaks in their late 30s. Campos and his colleagues (2002) also found that age was an important factor in using mate selection strategies. Women became less demanding as they aged, whereas men became more demanding.

As discussed before, little research has considered cultural differences in the choice of contents of personal ads. However, studies on culture and interpersonal communication have consistently found that people in individualist and collectivist cultures differ greatly in romantic beliefs and mate selection (e.g., Gudykunst & Nishida, 1983; Higgins, Zheng, Liu & Sun, 2002; Ju, 1993). For instance, in mate selection, people in individualist cultures tend to make decisions based on what their hearts feel, but people in collectivist cultures often consider what other people will say (Triandis, 1994). For comparative purposes, this study chose China and the United States to represent collectivist and individualist cultures respectively.

Differences in Mate Selection in China and the United States

The core ideas and norms of a culture can shape an individual’s internal representation of self and how the self is related to important others (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998). According to Dion and Dion (1996), interpretations of romantic love and intimacy vary across culture. In particular, cultural differences can be observed in mate selection. Among the substantial body of cross-cultural studies on romantic beliefs and mate selection, much evidence has revealed noticeable differences between Chinese and Americans (e.g., Gao, 2001; Hsu, 1985).

In Chinese culture, love is not the only consideration when searching for a mate. For a long time, parents arrange marriage for their children based on the compatibility of the two families (e.g., social status, family economics) (Cho & Cross, 1995). To the Chinese, romantic relationship often implies necessary seriousness and long-term commitment. Romantic love is not a means to look for excitement or entertainment. An individual needs to consider the obligations to the parents and family (Gao, 2001). The feeling of love between romantic partners is normally presented as a sense of responsibility and loyalty to the family (Tzeng & Gandarillas, 1992). Emotional feelings are not as important as action and commitment for the Chinese (Potter, 1988).

These attitudes toward love and marriage are reflected in the values based on which the Chinese select their mates. Cho and Cross (1995) studied Taiwanese love styles and found that most participants selected partners based on pragmatic reasons. The result confirmed the Chinese belief that the purpose of romance and marriage is to find a reliable person with whom one can spend the rest of one's life. Pimentel (2000) examined marital relations in Urban China. She found that even though more Chinese youths were enjoying the freedom in love and marriage, parents' approval in mate choice still meant a lot to Chinese couples. Chinese couples tended to put emphasis on what Westerners might characterize as a relatively unromantic vision of love, more like companionship.

Findings from cross-cultural research suggested salient differences in mate preferences between China and Western countries. A cross-cultural study conducted by Buss (1990) revealed that people from China and India were more likely to include chastity as a central element in mate selection. In a survey on the traits they valued in mate selection among Chinese and British college students, Higgins et al. (2002) found that, compared to their British counterparts, the

Chinese sample gave less value to interests but stressed more on morality, health, and chastity. Through evaluating the mate's personality and background one may ensure that his/her love relationship will be strong and enduring.

A romantic relationship seems to assume a somewhat different meaning in American culture, where passionate love is highly emphasized. Closeness and intimacy tend to carry greater weight in American society than in many collectivist countries. A study found that the Chinese equate love with sadness, jealousy, and other dark views, whereas Americans equated love with happiness (Shaver, Wu, & Schwartz, 1992). In a study comparing Americans and Chinese in their romantic attitudes, Hsu (1985) found that Americans valued free individual emotional expression, whereas Chinese emphasized traditional social norms. For many Americans, a committed relationship should be a consequence of a couple's strong emotional feelings and romantic love.

Emotional chemistry thus is a key element in mate selection for Americans. Cushman and Cahn (1993) found that for American respondents, when selecting a mate, one was attracted most to others of the opposite sex who were intelligent, physically attractive, and sexually appealing. These qualities remained to be the key defining characteristics during the development of a mate relationship. Family approval is desirable but not necessary in mate selection (Lalonde, Hynie, Pannu, & Tatla, 2004).

Gender Differences in Mate Selections

As another important factor that influences mate selection, gender has been widely investigated (e.g., Buss, 1990; Doosje, Rojahn, & Fischer, 1999; Nevid, 1984). Evidence has suggested that men and women show differences in self-presentation in personal ads. A 1970 study by Harrison and Saeed (1977) found that women were more likely to describe themselves as attractive and

men were more likely to offer financial security. A more recent study indicated that such gender differences in mate selection still exist (Gonzales & Meyers, 1993). Lynn and Shurgot (1984) found that the self-description in personal ads actually affected response numbers. Responses to ads placed by women depended more on offerings of attractiveness than responses to ads placed by men. Similarly, Goode (1996) found that men were primarily interested in the advertiser's looks more than women.

Women and men tend to value different qualities in their prospective mates. As Sedikides, Oliver, and Campbell (1994) summed, overall, women place a greater emphasis on intimacy than do men and are more pragmatic in their orientation (e.g., rating "financial security" as more important), whereas men show more preferences to sexuality than do women (e.g., rating "physically attractive" as more important). Through surveying men and women from 37 countries, Buss (1990) reported consistent gender differences across cultures: men preferred a mate who was young, healthy, and beautiful, while women valued earning capacity, ambition, and hard work in a mate.

A few studies also suggested gender differences may vary across cultures in some aspects of mate selection. For instance, Higgins et al.'s (2002) survey among university students in China and the United Kingdom showed that among the British sample, four traits that were mostly valued by men and women were personality, appearance, interests, and intelligence. However, these traits were ranked differently by men and women. British men placed greater value on appearance and health than did British women, while British women were more concerned about income and morality than British men. The traits that Chinese men valued most were personality, morality, health, and appearance, whereas what concerned Chinese women most were morality, intelligence, personality, and health. In addition, Chinese women were more concerned about

income, education, occupation, and family background. As the researchers noted, the “male-superior norms” (e.g., men need to be older, taller, and better educated) still existed in the U.K. sample, but were more prominent in the Chinese sample.

The Current Study

The aim of this study was to investigate cultural and gender differences in mate selection. Most previous cross-cultural investigations on romantic attitudes and beliefs relied on self-report (e.g., Buss, 1990; Gao, 2001; Higgins et al., 2002). A main disadvantage of self-report is that questions are usually highly standardized and the information obtained largely depends on instruments used (Singleton & Straits, 1999). The current study used content analysis to examine Chinese and American personal ads posted on dating websites. According to Holsti (1969), content analysis allows researchers to make inferences “by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages” (p.14). The personal ads may serve as a significant indicator of the qualities people seek in potential “significant others,” as well as those qualities they believe others seek in them (Strassberg & Holty, 2003).

This study used dating websites rather than print media for data collection for several reasons. First, the Internet dating service represents the newest trend of close relationship formation and development. According to the statistics in Match.com (2005), one of the most widely used online dating website, over 200,000 people had met special someone on their website in 2004. Many people have started to choose online dating in lieu of bars and other options. Second, advertisers can take their time to write and edit their online personal ads, which do not need to go through professional editors or publishers. Therefore, advertisers can have more freedom and flexibility to express their thoughts. Third, utilizing the Internet (vs. print media) allows the researcher to reach a large and diverse population (Strassberg & Holty, 2003).

Method

Sample

A total of four hundred personal ads were downloaded from dating websites. Two hundred personal ads were from two dating websites developed in the United States (www.date.com and www.match.com) and the other two hundred were downloaded from two dating websites developed in Mainland China (www.lovenet.com.cn and www.zhonghualove.com). These websites have similar formats. After advertisers fill in a form with basic demographic information, such as age and location, they can write their personal ads in a text space. They can also upload their pictures. Chinese personal ads were written in Chinese and American personal ads in English. One hundred most recently posted ads were downloaded from each website, fifty being placed by men and fifty by women. The current study only included advertisers between the ages of 20 and 45, which is an active age group for online dating sites (CITE?). Since this study was only concerned with differences between Chinese and Americans, advertisers who were from other countries were excluded. To make the comparison more equivalent, this study only included those ads from advertisers whose pictures were available for visitors to view.

Coding scheme

Each personal ad was analyzed for content in terms of what advertisers mentioned about themselves, what they were seeking in others, and what kind of relationship they were looking for. More specifically, for both self-description and features that advertisers were looking for in others, variables of interest were analyzed in terms of the following categories: (1) physical appearance: features such as facial appearance, hair, height; (2) health: physical health conditions; (3) personality: behavioral and emotional characteristics; (4) hobbies: a pursuit outside one's regular occupation engaged in especially for relaxation and entertainment; (5)

moralties: the quality of being in accord with standards of right or good conducts, such as treating others with respect; (6) financial status: expressions about financial conditions, including housing, profession, and income; (7) education: the education level achieved. The relationship level that the advertiser was looking for was classified into three categories: long-term relationships, casual dating, and friendships.

Two coders fluent in both English and Chinese were trained to code American personal ads and two coders fluent in Chinese were trained to code the Chinese ads. After reviewing the coding scheme, each coder independently applied the scheme to personal ads posted on the four dating websites. One tenth of randomly chosen ads in each language were coded by two coders, and discrepancies were resolved by a third coder. Inter-coder reliabilities were calculated using Cohen's Kappa. According to Cohen (1960), Cohen's Kappa is a preferred method for calculating the extent of agreement between observers or judges because it provides beyond-chance agreement. All reliability scores for the variables reported in this paper ranged from .72 to 1.00, which were considered good to perfect.

Results

Self-presentatio

The frequency count from cross-tabulations of two hundred American ads and two hundred Chinese ads revealed that that Chinese personal ads more frequently used descriptions on physical appearance, $\chi^2(1) = 171.07$, $p < .001$. Seventy-four percent of Chinese advertisers mentioned a least one aspect of their own physical appearances, as compared to 9.5% of American advertisers. The frequency of the depiction of facial appearance, $\chi^2(1) = 17.33$, $p < .001$ (Chinese: 20% vs. American: 6%), and body features, $\chi^2(1) = 178.99$, $p < .001$ (Chinese: 68.5% vs. American: 4.5%) was significantly higher in the case of Chinese personal ads. Similarly,

more Chinese personal ads included information about the advertiser's health condition than American ads $\chi^2(1) = 10.38, p < .001$ (Chinese: 7.5% vs. American: 1%).

Chinese personal ads were also more likely to contain self-descriptions related to financial status than American personal ads, $\chi^2(1) = 158.77, p < .001$. Only 18% of the American personal ads contained some information about financial status in contrast to 81% of Chinese personal ads. The frequency of disclosure on housing, $\chi^2(1) = 144.22, p < .001$ (Chinese: 53% vs. American: 0%), profession, $\chi^2(1) = 151.60, p < .001$ (Chinese: 78.5% vs. American: 17%), and income, $\chi^2(1) = 164.22, p < .001$ (Chinese: 60% vs. American: 1%) significantly differed between personal ads of the two cultures. Education was another important aspect of self-description in Chinese personal ads. Compared to American personal ads, many more Chinese personal ads included statements of the advertiser's educational background, $\chi^2(1) = 189.63, p < .001$ (Chinese: 69% vs. American: 3%). The result also revealed that a greater percentage of self-expression on morality in Chinese personal ads than in American personal ads, $\chi^2(1) = 13.1, p < .001$ (Chinese: 46% vs. American: 28.5%).

In terms of personality and hobbies, more American advertisers were willing to disclose such information than the Chinese (personality, $\chi^2(1) = 12.98, p < .001$; hobbies, $\chi^2(1) = 35.2, p < .001$). American personal ads showed higher levels of occurrence of descriptions on personality, (Chinese: 43% vs. American: 61%), and hobbies, (Chinese: 30% vs. American: 59.5%).

Additional analyses compared the gender differences in self-presentation in personal ads. The results are presented in table 1. These analyses revealed no significant gender differences in the likelihood of disclosing each type of personal characteristics among American sample. However, Chinese women were more likely than Chinese men to describe their physical appearances, $\chi^2(1) = 17.77, p < .001$, personalities, $\chi^2(1) = 8.05, p < .001$, and moralities, $\chi^2(1) = 11.75, p < .001$.

Chinese men were more likely than Chinese women to indicate the education they had received, $\chi^2(1) = 18.33, p < .001$.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Preferred Qualities in Others

Similar to the pattern shown in the self-description, Chinese personal ads and American personal ads showed substantial differences in preferred qualities in others. Chinese personal ads were more likely to state preferences in certain aspects of physical appearances than American personal ads, $\chi^2(1) = 33.08, p < .001$ (Chinese: 46% vs. American, 7%). Specifically, the frequencies of the preferences of facial appearance, $\chi^2(1) = 17.47, p < .001$ (Chinese: 14% vs. American, 2.5%), and body features, $\chi^2(1) = 21.45, p < .001$ (Chinese: 11.5% vs. American: 0.5%) were significantly higher in the case of Chinese personal ads.

More Chinese personal ads included some statements on preferred financial status of others, as compared to American personal ads, $\chi^2(1) = 25.2, p < .001$ (Chinese: 15.5% vs. American: 1.5%). Interestingly, 12% and 6% of Chinese personal ads listed profession and income respectively as important mate selection criteria, whereas only 1% of American personal ads contained requirements on profession, and no American personal ads included any condition of incomes, (profession, $\chi^2(1) = 19.91, p < .001$; income, $\chi^2(1) = 12.37, p < .001$). Likewise, while 14.5% of Chinese personal ads asked for education, no American personal ads did, $\chi^2(1) = 31.27, p < .001$. In addition, more Chinese personal ads contained expressions on morality-related mate qualities than did American personal ads, $\chi^2(1) = 27.47, p < .001$ (Chinese: 47.5% vs. American: 22.5%).

Corresponding with the occurrence of self-description on personality and hobbies, more American personal ads revealed that personalities and hobbies were important elements in mate selection than Chinese personal ads (personalities, $\chi^2(1) = 15.43$, $p < .001$, Chinese: 21% vs. American: 39%; hobbies, $\chi^2(1) = 29.59$, $p < .001$, Chinese: 2% vs. American: 18.5%). The personal ads of the two cultures did not differ significantly in the frequency of occurrence of health condition as a mate selection criterion.

The comparison of personal ads of men and women in each culture revealed that gender had only very little effect on preferences of qualities in others. Table 2 presents the percentages of subjects for culture by gender. More American men mentioned physical appearances as one criterion for mate selection than did American women, $\chi^2(1) = 3.75$, $p < .05$. Within the Chinese sample, more Chinese women seemed to care about financial status of their prospective partner than did Chinese men. $\chi^2(1) = 3.39$, $p < .05$. As table 2 shows, twice as many Chinese women as Chinese men asked for financial security in their potential mates.

Insert Table 2 About Here

Preferred Relationships

In terms of relationship information, 78% of Chinese advertisers looked for serious long-term relationships, as compared to 11% of Americans advertisers, $\chi^2(1) = 64.87$, $p < .001$. No significant differences were found in the percentage of Chinese and Americans who indicated they were seeking for friendships or casual dating relationships. It also should be noted that 66.5% Chinese advertisers highlighted the type of relationships that they were looking for, whereas only 30% American advertisers mentioned their relationship preferences.

Further analyses were conducted to examine gender differences in relationship preferences.

No gender differences were found among the American sample. The only gender difference in the Chinese sample existed in long-term relationships. Chinese men were more likely than Chinese women to look for long-term relationships, $\chi^2(1) = 4.12, p < .05$.

Discussion

The result of content analysis of online personal ads showed that culture plays a significant role in mate selection, which was reflected in both self-presentation and preferred mate attributes in person ads. In the self-presentation, more Chinese advertisers wrote about their physical appearances, health condition, financial status, education, and morality, while more American advertisers mentioned personalities and hobbies. A quite similar pattern was found in their statements on preferred mate attributes. These results are supportive to the contention suggesting that, for Chinese society, social achievements and morality are more important than “abstract personality desiderata” (Goodwin & Tang, 1996). The study also found that physical appearances of prospective mates were more of a concern for Chinese than Americans. It needs to be noted again that all dating websites include lover seekers’ photographs. This is probably why most Americans felt that it was unnecessary to write about physical characteristics. Still it is hard to explain why so many Chinese personal ads contain such information. One plausible reason is that since Chinese advertisers were more likely to ask for qualities related to physical appearance from their prospective mates, for the purpose of reciprocity, they felt the needs to describe their own physical characteristics first. Of course this interpretation is speculative, and requires further investigation.

No gender differences were found in American personal ads in the self-presentation. Chinese female advertisers were more likely to write about personality, morality, and physical

characteristics, particularly facial appearance and body features. As for preferred mate qualities, more American men included physical appearances as a preferred mate attribute in their personal ads than did American women, which supported the view that males tend to care more about physical attractiveness of their partners. More Chinese women mentioned financial status in their mate preferences than did Chinese men. This result seems to suggest that Chinese women are more pragmatic and realistic toward romantic relationships than Chinese men. As articulated by Zhou and Zhu (2004), in China, women's roles have been rather passive, and thus women tend to find job and financial security desirable in men. In addition, quite interestingly, the characteristics that Chinese women most often described in their personal ads corresponded with the qualities that Chinese men valued most as listed in Higgies et al's (2002) study. This finding also confirmed the central argument on impression management — people may purposely manage their impression according to the preference of message receivers (Rao, et al., 1995).

It is not surprising to see that more Chinese were looking for long-term relationships than their American counterparts. In the Chinese culture, meaningful romantic relational interactions are often based on feelings of long-term commitment. As the results show, while most Americans preferred not to give a definition to the prospective relationships before personal interactions started and progressed, the majority of Chinese advertisers talked about long-term relationships or even marriage in order to show their seriousness in mate seeking.

In general, the findings of the current research suggested that culture has a deep imprint on the people's attitude toward love and marriage. Even though the sample in this study are personal ads posted on a relatively new medium, the Internet, the content of these personal ads still reflect people's conventional culture-bound romantic beliefs. Just as Chinese personal ads reflected traditional Chinese romantic beliefs (e.g., financial stability as one fundamental basis for

marriage), American personal ads reflected Western romantic beliefs (e.g., the importance of compatibility of personalities). The results are generally consistent with findings about relationships between culture and mate selections obtained from self-reports. According to Hatala, Nilewski, and Baack (1999), personal ad placers only reveal what they believe to be the most salient information about themselves that will attract a partner. In this study, advertisers of both cultures seemed to have very clear ideas about most valued qualities in mate selection in their culture. Their self-description was largely based on what they believed to be of interest to the ads' prospective readers.

The current research only examined the frequency of occurrence of statements related to personal attributes, but did not closely analyze detailed content of each personal ad. Future research would benefit by examining not only how frequently statements on personal attributes occur, but also how these personal attributes are presented. Such studies may help clarify unexpected findings of the current study. In addition, some studies have revealed that demographic factors such as age and education may affect people's romantic beliefs (Doosje, Rojahn, & Fischer, 1999; Moore, Kennedy, Furlonger, & Evers, 1999). It would be useful to examine how these demographic factors may interact with culture to influence mate preferences.

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Table 1

Percentage of Subjects for Each Culture and Gender in Self-description Category.

Self-Description Variables	<u>Americans</u>		<u>Chinese</u>	
	Men (N=100)	Women (N=100)	Men (N=100)	Women (N=100)
Physical appearance	12%	7%	61%	87%
Facial Appearance	8%	4%	14%	26%
Body Features	5%	4%	55%	82%
Others	3%	2%	4%	5%
Health	1%	1%	10%	5%
Financial Information	20%	16%	78%	84%
Housing	0%	0%	49%	57%
Profession	18%	16%	82%	75%
Income	2%	0%	54%	66%
Education	4%	2%	83%	55%
Morality	31%	26%	36%	56%
Personality	59%	63%	31%	55%
Hobbies	61%	58%	26%	34%

Table 2

Percentage of Subjects for Each Culture and Gender in Mate Preferences Category.

Self-Description Variables	<u>Americans</u>		<u>Chinese</u>	
	Men (N=100)	Women (N=100)	Men (N=100)	Women (N=100)
Physical Appearances	6%	1%	24%	22%
Facial Appearance	4%	1%	15%	13%
Body Features	0%	1%	11%	12%
Others	2%	1%	6%	6%
Health	1%	1%	4%	4%
Financial Information	2%	1%	11%	22%
Housing	0%	0%	0%	1%
Profession	1%	1%	10%	14%
Income	0%	0%	4%	8%
Education	4%	2%	14%	15%
Morality	18%	27%	41%	45%
Personality	35%	43%	25%	17%
Hobbies	15%	22%	0%	4%
