

## Personal Advertisements: Sources of Data about Relationships

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*Personal advertisements are a growing means of meeting other people and establishing relationships. The variety of these advertisements makes them an excellent source of data for social science research, but this interesting resource is presently underutilized. This article attempts to persuade more social scientists to use personal ads as a source of research data and it discusses the positive features of this data source and outlines various research methods possible with them. Existing studies using personal advertisements as a source of data are reviewed as illustrations of the methods presented.*

Shy Wm 25, 5 '9", slim, seeks honest & affectionate 1-on-1 with big brother type 20-35. Reply w/pic please to ADVOCATE Box XXXXX — *The Advocate*

Tasteful Traveller — Available as companion to a discriminating female of means. I am 6'1", 188 lbs., thick curly hair, blue/green eyes and have an infectious, melodious voice with a witty, wholesome way. Love to laugh and play. Phone and return address please. P.O. Box XXXX XXXX Murray Hill Sta., NY, NY 10156 — *New York*

F2049 I am an attractive Caucasian, 34 years old, 5'2Vi\ 105 lbs., professional woman. I am a nonsmoker. I enjoy going out to dinner, movies, plays, boating, the beach and the ocean, romantic dinners at home, spectator sports, and travel. Mainly I'm looking for a meaningful relationship with an intelligent and considerate man between the ages 34 - 50. I would like to find a man who is honest, sharing, loyal, and affectionate. A man who can respect me for the person I am. If interested, please write and send photo if possible. — *Living Single*

Personal advertisements, also called 'lonely hearts' ads, 'companions' ads, and 'profiles', have become a popular means of meeting people and establishing relationships. These advertisements now appear in most major city newspapers and in numerous other national and regional publications. A recent book entitled *Classified Love* (Foxman, 1982) lists over ninety outlets for these advertisements across the United States.

The content and style of these numerous personal advertisements vary greatly. Most advertisements contain a description of the advertiser, an indication of the type of relationship sought, and a description of the ideal respondent, but few other generalizations can be made about them. Advertisements seek people to fill such diverse roles as husband, wife, travelling companion, and friend, as well as more sexually explicit roles such as mistress, sugar daddy, sexual slave, heterosexual lover, and homosexual lover. Advertisements vary in length from 1 or 2 column lines to 14 or 15 column lines each, depending on the publication's charge per line and the loquaciousness of the advertiser. The descriptions contained in these lines are as variable as the advertisers. Finally advertisements differ in style — some are cute and humorous, while others are quite dry and businesslike.

The number and diversity of personal advertisements make them interesting topics of scientific research. It would be worthwhile to know the answers to questions such as: what kinds of people place and respond to personal advertisements, how do people present themselves in personal advertisements, and what do respondents look for in personal advertisements? The answers to these questions are interesting in their own right, but are also important as they relate to more general theories and phenomena. Such data could provide information about people's implicit theories of attraction and impression management, as well as information about the effectiveness of various self-presentation strategies, the determinants of initial interpersonal attraction, and the cultural and sociological influences on various interpersonal relationships.

Despite these research possibilities, very few studies have been done with personal advertisements. This article is intended to convince more social scientists to utilize this interesting and valuable resource. The first part of the article discusses the positive features of personal advertisements as sources of research data; then we outline numerous possible research methods and illustrate them (and possible research topics) with existing, published and unpublished studies.

### **Positive Features of Personal Advertisements**

Placing and responding to personal advertisements is naturalistic behaviour as opposed to behaviour in a laboratory. Behaviour in laboratory settings is 'real' behaviour in some sense, but laboratory settings typically differ on a number of dimensions from naturalistic settings. In the laboratory, subjects frequently know that they are being studied by psychologists, subjects' behaviors typically have only short-term consequences (if any at all) for the subjects themselves, and subjects are usually college freshers. None of these usual features of laboratory work is common in the naturalistic settings to which we sometimes wish to generalize and apply our research findings. Research in

naturalistic settings is useful when external validity is important to the research objectives. Given such objectives, the naturalistic features of personal advertisements recommend them as sources of research data and these positive features are briefly discussed below.

### *Naive Subjects*

One positive feature of personal advertisements as sources of research data is that (for many of the designs discussed below) subjects are not aware that they are being studied. This aspect of personal ads allows an investigator to avoid many of the demand characteristics and impression management demands that can affect laboratory research. Of course, personal advertisers and respondents are subject to impression management demands from one another, but this is different from the demands of an uninvolved, third-party voyeur. Indeed, the investigator is frequently interested in precisely those demands that advertisers and respondents place on one another and the concomitant management of impressions that is a part of their interpersonal relationship.

### *Consequential Behavior*

A second relevant feature of personal advertisements is that the consequences of placing and responding to personal ads are more representative of naturalistic settings than are the consequences of the typical interpersonal behaviour in laboratory settings. The stimulus persons in laboratory research are frequently only hypothetical individuals and even when these stimulus persons are real, subjects are likely to know that they will never meet the persons again. The problem with these laboratory situations is that the subject's behaviour carries little, if any, long-term consequences. This lack of consequence is in stark contrast to naturalistic settings where our behaviour towards other people affects both the duration and the quality of our relationships. Placing and responding to personal advertisements involve consequences found in other naturalistic settings. What an advertiser says in his or her advertisement is likely to affect both the number and type of respondents he or she will attract. Moreover, not only the number but also the quality of respondents is important to an advertiser. Of course respondents also want to be contacted by those advertisers to whom they responded, so their letters have meaningful and possibly long-term consequences for them as well.

### *Representative Samples*

A third positive feature of personal advertisements is that personal advertisers and their respondents better represent the population at large (on many dimensions) than do the college subjects of the typical laboratory experiment. These advertisements are placed, and responded to, by people of

all ages, races, occupations and educational levels. Despite this diversity, there is a persistent belief that persons who use personal ads are somehow different (that is, mentally or physically undesirable) from the population at large. There is little evidence to support this view, however, and there are several reasons for rejecting it. First, a study by Brock & Buttermore (1983, unpub.) found that members of a video-dating service were within the national norms on the *California Psychological Inventory*. While personal advertisements are different from video-dating services, both are relatively new methods of meeting people and it is reasonable to assume that they would draw on a similar population. Second, a study by Austrom & Hanel (1983, unpub.) found that most of a sample of advertisements in the *Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star* reported placing personal ads because of their convenience. Many of the people reported that they disliked pickup bars, lacked the time to meet people, or didn't meet people during their daily routine. These people sound like average single adults, not like desperate 'weirdos'. Finally personal advertisements are a growing avenue for meeting other people. As the number of participants increases, so their representativeness of the population at large should also increase.

### **Research Methods Using Personal ads**

Personal advertisements may be used in a variety of different research methods, several of which are presented below. For each of the methods presented, the method is described, an existing published or unpublished study is presented as an example of the method, and the research topics addressable by the method are discussed.

#### *Analyzing the Content of Ads*

Perhaps the simplest and most informative use of personal advertisements is in content analyses. These content analyses may be purely descriptive or may involve any number of inferential tests. It is possible, for example, to correlate different elements of advertisement content or to test for group differences in advertisement content. Several content analyses along these lines have already been conducted.

Cameron et al. (1977) conducted a descriptive content analysis of 347 personal advertisements that appeared in a 'respectable\* singles newspaper in California. Advertisements were coded for the following claimed and desired characteristics: gender, personality, physical appearance, goal for relationships, recreation and interests, appearance, education, occupation, and financial status. In general advertisers\* claims and desires were consistent with traditional sex-role expectations — appearance was stressed for women and status was stressed for men.

Harrison & Saeed (1977) used a content analysis of personal advertisements to test the matching hypothesis and to determine variations (with age and gender) in the qualities and characteristics sought and offered in ads for romantic partners. Advertisements were coded on the following binary (yes/no) variables: offers attractiveness, seeks attractiveness, offers financial security, seeks financial security, offers sincerity, seeks sincerity, seeks photograph, seeks marriage, seeks older partner and seeks younger partner. They found that women were more likely than men to be explicit in seeking financial security, sincerity and an older partner. Men were more likely than women to be explicit in seeking attractiveness, marriage and a younger partner whilst offering financial security. Only offers of and demands for financial security varied systematically with age. Consistent with the matching hypothesis, Harrison & Saeed (1977) also found a small, but significant correlation between the number of traits that an advertiser offered and sought.

Bolig et al. (1984) also conducted a study assessing gender differences in the content of personal advertisements. Advertisers' self-descriptions and advertisers' desires of respondents were coded on the following categories: physical attributes, age, nature of relationship desired, habits, religious affiliation, personality characteristics, marital status, education, job/career, activities, race, child and family obligations, and requesting a photo. The results of this study suggested that women were interested in exchanging personality traits and education/careers, while men were interested in exchanging physical attractiveness and interests/activities. In addition the results replicated Harrison & Saeed's (1977) finding that men tended to seek younger partners, while women tended to seek older partners.

These three studies illustrate the type of content analyses that are possible with personal advertisements. However, they do not exhaust the research topics to which such analyses can be addressed. These studies have concentrated on gender differences in advertisement content. It would be equally interesting to study race, age, socioeconomic status, sexual preference, and geographical differences in advertisement content.

#### *Correlating Ad Content with the Number of Responses Received*

Many magazines which carry personal ads ask respondents to write to advertisers 'care of the magazine which then forwards these letters to the appropriate people. This round-about system is employed to ensure the anonymity of advertisers to the general public. This is fortuitous for potential researchers, because they can frequently persuade a magazine to record the number of responses that

each advertisement receives. This information can then be correlated with different aspects of advertisement content in a simple, efficient research design.

Lynn & Shurgot (1984) employed such a design to assess the impact of different aspects of physical appearance on initial romantic interest. They coded 395 advertisements for the advertiser's sex, evaluative self-description, height, weight, eye color, and hair color. These variables were then entered into regression analysis, utilizing as a dependent measure, the number of responses received to each advertisement during the first month. Results indicated that more responses were received by advertisers providing non-negative evaluative self-descriptions than by advertisers not providing these descriptions. In addition tall male advertisers and slender female advertisers received more responses than their shorter and heavier counterparts. Eye and hair color did not predict the number of responses an advertiser received.

Lynn & Shurgot's (1984) study demonstrates the usefulness of the correlation design it employed. Such a design could be used to assess the impact on initial attraction of any variable mentioned by advertisers. This design could also be used to investigate the impact on attraction of other variables not explicitly mentioned in advertisements. For example, it is possible to rate advertisements on the advertiser's depth of self-disclosure, sense of humor or uniqueness, and to assess the impact of these variables on attraction.

#### *Comparing Ad Content with Information from Advertisers*

Where a personal advertisement outlet refuses to provide the number of responses that advertisements received, this information may be acquired by writing to advertisers and requesting it directly from them. Moreover, advertisers may be asked to provide additional information by means such as answering questionnaires, completing personality inventories, and/or sending copies of the responses that they received. A comparison of this additional information with advertisement content constitutes another research method provided by personal advertisements.

Austrom & Hanel (1983) conducted a study that used this methodology. Questionnaires were sent to 521 personal advertisers. Ninety-one people returned the completed questionnaires. The questionnaire asked how many days the ad had been run, how many responses were received, how friends had reacted, why the ad was placed, what type of companionship was sought, how satisfied the person was with the results, how often the person felt bored or lonely, and a variety of questions about the person's job and socio-economic status. One of the various findings is especially noteworthy. Many

advertisers who were interested in a long-term romantic relationship were unwilling to say so in their advertisements. Most of these people advertised for friendship instead.

Lynn (1983, unpub.) also conducted a study using a variation of this method. The distributions of height, weight, hair color and eye color among advertisers who mentioned these characteristics were compared with estimates of the corresponding distributions in the population of advertisers. Questionnaires distributed at a singles party (sponsored by the magazine carrying the personal advertisements that were analyzed) provided data for the estimates of the population distributions. Results indicated that slender female advertisers were more likely to mention their weight than were either thinner or heavier female advertisers. No other statistically significant selective self-presentation biases were found.

The advantage of comparing additional information from personal advertisers with ad content is perhaps greater than that of any other research method using these ads. The types of information that may be requested of advertisers is virtually unlimited. This information could be used to study such diverse topics as personality differences in romantic desires, selective self-presentation strategies and implicit theories of attraction. Of course the information acquired from correspondence with personal advertisers need not be compared with ad content. Investigators might correspond with advertisers simply to get subjects for other naturalistic studies of interpersonal relationships.

#### *Using the Number of Ads as a Dependent Variable*

The number of personal advertisements in a publication may also be used as a dependent variable. This measure may be used, for example, in a one group pre-test/ post-test design with a variety of one-time social events as the independent variable. The number of advertisements in a publication may also be used in a time series or correlational study with numerous recurring events as the independent variables.

Austrom et al. (1980) used the number of ads placed in Toronto's major papers as a dependent measure in two studies. In Study I the impact of a full page article that was favourable to personal ads was assessed. The number of ads was significantly greater following the article than it was during a similar time period before the article. In Study II, seasonal trends in the number of ads were investigated. The number of ads was negatively correlated with the temperature, suggesting that people are more likely to use personal ads when the climate hinders meeting people in person. Despite this trend, however, the number of ads dropped during the Christmas season, possibly because of the greater number of social functions at which people can meet others during this time.

Using the number of personal advertisements in a publication as a dependent measure is particularly suited to sociological research on interpersonal relations. This measure could be used to assess the impact on various relationships of legislative changes, economic conditions, media events and/or cultural holidays. Do people seek more financially based relationships, for example, during hard economic times? Does the release of movies like *Making Love* or *Liana* increase the number of people willing to advertise their homosexuality? These and other questions can be addressed by using the number of personal ads in particular publications as dependent measures in social scientific research.

### *Placing Ads and Evaluating Responses*

A final research method using personal advertisements deserves critical mention. Although it is presently untried, investigators may place ads themselves and evaluate the responses that they receive. This design permits investigators to control for ad content, but it has only a limited utility and is generally unethical. This methodology provides no parameters for statistical tests on the number of responses elicited; this means that investigators are required to use response content as the dependent variable. Response content can be compared with ad content to test the matching hypothesis, but it is not clear how responses could be used apart from this.

Another limitation of this methodology is the difficulty of creating comparison groups. If two ads that are identical on all but one dimension are run in the same publication at the same time, then readers are likely to become suspicious and their responses biased. If the two ads are run at different times, then differences between the experimental and control groups may be due to history and/or maturation. Given these difficulties, the control over ad content afforded by this method seems less impressive.

A final consideration about placing personal ads for scientific purposes concerns its ethicality. People who respond to these ads expect to be evaluated by a potential partner. Placing personal ads for research purposes violates these expectations and imposes numerous costs on unwilling subjects. Some publications require respondents to pay a 'handling' fee and having people pay this fee — not to mention postage and writing time — without the possibility of establishing a relationship is unethical. Investigators could reimburse subjects, but such reimbursements in the absence of an explanation might make subjects feel rejected and reimbursement with explanation might make subjects feel used. Given the limited utility of this design and its ethical problems, it seems better to use the other methods discussed.

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