Responses to Lonely Hearts Advertisements: Effects of Reported Physical Attractiveness, Physique, and Coloration

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This study employed lonely hearts advertisements to investigate the effects of reported physical appearance on interpersonal attraction. The personal advertisements in a local Columbus magazine were coded in terms of the individual's gender, height, weight, hair color, eye color, and evaluative self-description of his or her own appearance. The magazine recorded the number of responses each ad received, and this constituted the dependent measure. Multiple linear regression analyses indicated that more responses were received by women and by individuals providing nonnegative, evaluative self-descriptions than by their counterparts. Also, tall male advertisers and light female advertisers received more responses than their shorter and heavier counterparts. Finally, advertisers with red or salt and pepper hair received more responses than blonde and brunette advertisers. Discussion focused on the relations between these findings and those of past research and on the utility of lonely hearts advertisements in psychological research.

Research on interpersonal attraction has consistently demonstrated that physical appearance is an important determinant of romantic interest (Brislin & Lewis, 1968; Tesser & Brodie, 1971; Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, & Rottman, 1966). Less clearly demonstrated are the specific aspects of physical appearance that contribute to romantic attractiveness. Three such potentially important aspects of physical appearance are height, weight, and coloration.

There is evidence that tall men are perceived as better than shorter ones. Tall men, for instance, receive larger salaries (Feldman, 1971) and receive more votes for public office (Berkowitz, Nebel, & Reitman, 1971) than do shorter men. More relevant to the effects of height on romantic attraction, however, is Graziano, Brothan, and Berscheid's (1978) finding that women report a preference for dating men of medium height. Unfortunately, Graziano et al.'s study has not been replicated outside the laboratory, and no one has investigated men's preferences for their female romantic partners' heights.

Berscheid and Walster (1974) do note that men tend to be taller than their female romantic partners, but it is not clear from this implicit rule of pairing that absolute height has any effect on romantic attraction.

Equally ambiguous are the effects of weight on romantic attraction. A number of laboratory studies have demonstrated that both men and women prefer medium weight, mesomorphic bodies to other types (Beck, Ward-Hull, & McClean, 1976; Lavarkas, 1975; Lerner & Gilbert, 1969; Lerner& Korn, 1972; Wiggins, Wiggins, & Conger, 1968), but the implications of this preference for romantic attraction have never been fully explored. Spuhler (1968) found slight, but positive evidence for body type matching in married couples. His study, however, does not indicate if there is a general tendency for people to pursue romantic partners of a particular body type or not.

A final physical attribute that may contribute to romantic attractiveness is coloration of eyes and hair. Feinman and Gill (1978) found that men report a preference for women with light colored hair and eyes whereas women report a preference for men with dark hair and eyes. It is not clear, however, how these preferences affect romantic attraction.

The study reported here overcomes these limitations of previous research by investigating the effects of advertiser's height, weight, and coloration on responses to lonely hearts advertisements. This paradigm has four distinctions from much of the previous research on these topics. First, the dependent variable is romantic attraction rather than merely liking. Second, the dependent measure is behavioral and entails real costs and consequences (subjects must pay one dollar to respond to an ad and may have a date with the individual who placed the ad). Third, both male and female subjects are employed, permitting tests for interactions with gender. Finally, the subjects are not college freshmen, but come from a variety of age groups and occupations.

In addition to examining the effects of height, weight, and coloration on romantic attractiveness, this study extends the use of lonely hearts ads in research on interpersonal relations. Harrison and Saeed (1977) used a content analysis of such ads to test the matching hypothesis. They found that the number of attributes advertisers offered respondents was positively correlated with the number of attributes sought from respondents. These results support the matching hypothesis and suggest that lonely hearts advertisements are a potentially useful source of data for further research. This investigation extends Harrison and Saeed's (1977) content analysis of personal advertisements by correlating content with the number of responses elicited.

Method

Data Source

Living Single, a local magazine for singles in Columbus, Ohio, features a personal advertisement section in which readers can submit descriptions of themselves and receive responses from individuals interested in dating them. Advertisements do not contain the advertisers' names, addresses, or phone numbers. Instead, each ad is identified by a unique number, and respondents address letters to these numbers in care of the magazine. *Living Single* forwards these responses to the appropriate people. Respondents must pay a $1.00 fee for each ad they answer. Each month the magazine carries approximately 30 old and 80 new ads that elicit an average of ten responses each.

Independent Variables

395 advertisements that appeared in five issues of *Living Single* were coded for the advertiser's sex, evaluative self-description, height, weight, eye color, and hair color.[i] These variables were coded in the following manner.

Evaluative Self-Description

Each advertisement was coded as either containing a nonnegative evaluative description of the advertiser's general physical appearance or not. Advertisements that were coded as containing these evaluative descriptions employed one of the following terms or phrases to describe the advertiser's general appearance: "not bad looking," "definitely not a frog," "my looks do not scare small children," "average," "cute," "good looking," "good features," "decent looks," "nice looking," "photogenic," "attractive," "pretty," "handsome," "becoming," "voluptuous," "beauty," "exceptional," "adonis," "stunning," and "look like a movie star."

Height

Advertisers' heights were coded as a quantitative variable. Those advertisements that contained no reference to the advertiser's height, or that contained only qualitative references such as "short," "medium," or "tall," were given missing values on this variable.

Weight

Advertisers' weights were also coded as a quantitative variable. Advertisements that did not contain quantitative information about the advertiser's weight were given missing values on this variable.

Eye Color

Advertisers' eye colors were coded as either blue, brown, or other. The "other" category included hazel, green, grey, and blue-green eye colors. Advertisements not containing information about the advertiser's eye color were given a missing value on this variable.

Hair Color

Advertisers' hair colors were coded as either blonde, brunette, or other. Advertisements were placed in the "blonde" category if they contained one of the following terms to describe the advertiser's hair color: "blonde," "strawberry blonde," "medium blonde," "reddish blonde," "sandy," "brownish blonde," "dark blonde," and "honey blonde." Advertisements were placed in the "brunette" category if they employed one of the following terms: "brunette," "dark," "brown," "light brown," "golden brown," "reddish brown," and "black." Advertisements were placed in the "other" category if they used one of the following terms: "salt and pepper," "brown/gray," "brown with a lot of silver," "frosted," "red," "auburn," and "strawberry blonde/red." Advertisements not containing information about the advertiser's hair color were given a missing value on this variable.

Dependent Variables

The dependent variable in this study was the number of responses each advertisement received during the first month it was run. This information was recorded by *Living Single* and was given to us for use in the study.

Results

The information recorded from the 395 advertisers in this study indicates that the modal advertiser is male, stands 6 feet tall, weighs 160 pounds, and has dark hair and eyes. The effects of each of these attributes (i.e., gender, evaluative description, height, weight, hair color, and eye color) on the number of responses advertisers received are analyzed using the hierarchical multiple regressions outlined below.[ii]

Gender

205 advertisements in this study were placed by men and 190 were placed by women. Male advertisers received an average of nine responses each and female advertisers received an average of eleven responses each. Although this difference is only marginally significant under a t-test [$t(393)$ = 1.93, $p < .06$], it is reliable in almost all of the multiple regression analyses below. The squared semipartial correlation coefficient (spr_2) for gender in the immediate analyses below, for example, was .01 and this is reliable [with $F(1,391)$ = 3.94] at the .05 level. Gender was entered into the regression models below as a covariate so its effects are not reported, and other reported effects have had its influence partialed out.

Evaluative Descriptions

181 advertisements contained nonnegative evaluative self-descriptions. No one evaluated themselves negatively. A hierarchical multiple regression of gender, evaluative description, and their interaction on the number of responses received by each advertisement produced a significant effect for evaluative description (spr_2 = .05, $F(1,391)$ = 22.46, $p < .0001$) and a marginally significant effect for the interaction (spr_2 = .01, $F(1,391)$ = 3.16, $p < .08$). Advertisers who provided nonnegative, evaluative self-descriptions received more responses than those who did not (12.76 vs. 7.63), and female advertisers benefitted more than male advertisers from providing these descriptions (females: 14.15 vs. 7.34; males: 10.92 vs. 7.82).

Height

311 advertisements contained quantitative information about the advertisers heights. The distribution of male advertisers' heights had a mean of 70.5 inches and a standard deviation of 2.65 inches. The distribution of female advertisers' heights had a mean of 65.1 inches and a standard deviation of 2.46 inches. A hierarchical multiple regression of gender, height, and their interaction revealed a marginally significant effect for height [$F(1,307)$ = 3.75, $p < .06$] and a significant effect for the interaction [$F(1,307)$ = 4.29, $p < .04$]. Taller male advertisers received more responses than shorter male advertisers (R^2 = .05, $F(1,171)$ = 9.61, $p < .002$), whereas female advertisers' heights did not influence the number of responses they received (R^2 = .00; $F(1,136)$ = .11, n.s.).[iii]

Weight

233 advertisements contained quantitative information about both the advertisers heights and weights. The distribution of male advertisers' weights had a mean of 170.1 pounds and a standard

deviation of 22.72 pounds. The distribution of female advertisers' weights had a mean of 122.9 pounds and a standard deviation of 11.83 pounds. A hierarchical multiple regression that included gender, height, and their interaction as covariates, along with weight and its interactions with the three covariates, revealed a significant weight X gender interaction ($F_{(1,225)} = 4.78$, $p < .03$). Separate hierarchical regression models for male and female advertisers indicated a nonsignificant tendency for heavier male advertisers to receive more responses than lighter male advertisers ($spr^2 = .01$, $F_{(1,147)} = 1.29$, n.s.) and a marginally significant tendency for lighter female advertisers to receive more responses than heavier female advertisers ($spr^2 = .04$, $F_{(1,80)} = 2.91$, $p < .10$).

Hair and Eye Color

173 advertisements contained information about the advertisers' hair color and eye color. These variables were dummy coded and entered into a regression model with gender and all possible interactions as independent variables. This regression revealed a significant effect only for the triple-order interaction ($F_{(1,156)} = 3.72$, $p < .02$). Unfortunately, small frequencies in several cells prohibit a meaningful breakdown of this interaction.

Discussion

The results of this study replicate previous findings regarding the importance of physical appearance in romantic attraction (see Berscheid & Walster, 1974; Huston & Levinger, 1978 for reviews of this literature). Advertisers who provided assurances that they were not unattractive received more responses than advertisers who omitted such assurances. Of course, peoples' ratings of their own attractiveness are only lowly correlated with others' ratings of their attractiveness (Murstein, 1972; Strobe, Insko, Thompson, & Layton, 1971) so these assurances may have been misleading, but respondents had no other source for this information and had to assume that it was correct. Also consistent with earlier research is the finding that men's responses to female advertisers were slightly more dependent on the presence of these assurances of physical attractiveness than were women's responses to male advertisers.

In addition to indicating that self-proclaimed attractive advertisers receive more responses than less attractive advertisers, the results of this study indicate that taller male advertisers received more responses than shorter male advertisers. This is consistent with Feldman (1971) and Berkowitz et al.'s (1971) research, but is inconsistent with Graziano et al.'s (1978) finding that women prefer dating men of medium height. Perhaps taller men received more responses than shorter men, not because women

prefer tallness per se, but because women prefer men taller than themselves and the taller a male advertiser was the more likely he was to meet this criterion. If this explanation is correct, however, one might expect that men would prefer women shorter than themselves. Contrary to this expectation, female advertisers' heights did not affect the number of responses they received. One explanation for this gender X height interaction is that height is associated with power (Korda, 1975; Wilson, 1968), and women may be more concerned with having powerful romantic partners than are men.

Whereas women seem to seek tall romantic partners, the results of this study suggest that men seek light (as opposed to heavy) partners. A significant gender X weight interaction in this study consisted of a small, nonsignificant tendency for heavier male advertisers to receive more responses than lighter male advertisers and a larger, marginally significant tendency for lighter female advertisers to receive more responses than heavier female advertisers. The absence of any reliable weight effects for men and women separately makes conclusions about the gender X weight interaction difficult, but it appears as though men prefer light partners whereas women are relatively unconcerned about their partner's weight. This suggestion is inconsistent with research cited earlier showing that both sexes prefer medium body builds, but is consistent with findings that men are more concerned with their romantic partners' physical appearance than are women (Berscheid, Dion, Walster, & Walster, 1971; Krebs & Adinolfi, 1975).

Advertisers' coloration also affected the number of responses they received. There was a significant gender X hair color X eye color interaction and a significant main effect of hair color when gender, evaluation description, height, weight, and height X weight were statistically controlled (see footnote 2). Small cell frequencies prohibited a meaningful interpretation of the interaction, but the main effect of hair color indicated that advertisers with red or salt and pepper hair received more responses than either blonde or brunette advertisers. This result is contrary to Feinman and Gill's (1978) finding that women prefer dark haired men while men prefer light haired women, but perhaps this difference is due to the different populations studied. Feinman and Gill studied the coloration preferences of college undergraduates whereas this study examines the preferences of older adults. It is reasonable that older adults find slightly greying hair attractive while college students have traditional hair color preferences.

Finally, this study extended the use of lonely hearts ads to psychological research. Our study goes beyond previous content analyses and demonstrates the utility of this data source for correlational research as well. Given the increasing role that advertising and dating services are playing in romantic

attraction, these new avenues of interpersonal contact should become both more frequent sources and more interesting topics of research.

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[i] Each advertisement was coded by two individuals who agreed on 97.76% of the 2,370 decisions required in coding the 395 ads. The majority of disagreements involved simple oversight and all disagreements were readily corrected.

[ii] A single hierarchical multiple regression of gender, evaluative self-description, height, weight, height X weight, hair color, eye color, and each of their interactions with gender on the number of responses advertisers received accounted for 24.2% of the variance in the dependent variable (F (17,108) = 2.02, p < .02). Significant effects were found for gender [spr2 = .03, F (1,108) = 4.29, p < .05], evaluative self-description [spr2 = .04, F (1,108) = 5.45, p < .03], height [spr2 = .05, F (1,108) = 6.44, p < .02], and hair color (spr2 = .06, F (2,108) = 4.26, p < .02]. A marginally significant effect was observed for the gender X weight interaction [spr2 = .03, F (1,108) = 3.87, p < .06]. Except for the effect of hair color, these results are basically the same as those reported in the separate regression analyses. In this analysis, advertisers who had red or salt and pepper hair received more responses than advertisers who had either blonde or brunette hair.

[iii] A separate regression equation involving gender, a linear component of height, a quadratic component of height, and the appropriate interactions revealed no significant main effect for the quadratic component [F (1,305) = .05, n.s.] or significant gender X quadratic component interaction [F (1,305) = .15, n.s.].