

In the game of online dating, men and women try to level up, study finds

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In the world of online dating, men and women look to find someone a little out of their league, according to a new study. Scientists who analyzed user data from a popular dating site have found that

heterosexual men and women reach out to potential dating partners who are on average about 25 percent more attractive than they are.

The findings, published in the journal *Science Advances*, shed new light on the patterns and priorities of men and women when they peruse dating sites.

Researchers have long tried to pin down the behaviors that drive people to choose particular romantic partners.

Couples, married or not, tend to have similar ages, educations, levels of attractiveness and a host of other characteristics. This could mean that people try to find partners who "match" their stats. On the other hand, it could mean that people try to find slightly more attractive mates, which results in the same pattern as the most desirable partners pair off, followed by the next most desirable, and so on.

The problem is that looking at established couples leaves out the process of courtship—which could tell you much more about what people look for in a mate, how they woo them and how often they're rejected.

"What you don't observe is all the people who asked out someone who said 'no'—which is really the information you need if you want to understand desirability hierarchies," said lead author Elizabeth Bruch, a computational sociologist at the University of Michigan.

Online dating offers a solution, because you can see who first contacts whom, and whether the recipient responds to that initial message.

So for this paper, the scientists used anonymized data from an unnamed [dating site](#) for nearly 187,000 users across four U.S. cities—New York, Boston, Chicago and Seattle—for a month.

Rather than gauge individual attractiveness or desirability themselves, the scientists relied on the site users to do the rankings: Users were ranked as more desirable depending on how many first [messages](#) they received, and depending on how desirable the senders themselves were.

It's an iterative algorithm called PageRank, used by Google to rank websites in their search engine results. (The most popular person in their data set was a 30-year-old woman in New York who received 1,504 messages, about one every half hour.)

Then, to make their calculations, they essentially placed all the users on a scale of 0 to 1. The least desirable man and woman in each city had a score of 0 and the most desirable man and woman had a score of 1, with everyone else's score in between.

The scientists found that men and women sent initial messages to potential partners who were more desirable than them—men went 26 percent higher on average, while the women aimed 23 percent higher.

Did these users simply think they were more desirable than they were? Or did they know that they were seeking out relatively more attractive mates?

To find out, the scientists analyzed the messages they sent, picking up clear patterns. Women consistently sent more positively worded messages to men when the "desirability gap" was greater, the scientists said—a sign that they were putting in more effort for a more desirable man.

Men, however, did the opposite: They sent less positively worded messages to more desirable women.

"My co-author and I used to joke that the men are playing it cool,"

Bruch said. "They're not being as enthusiastic when they're approaching more desirable partners."

Strangely, the men's strategy seemed to work. In all four cities, men had slightly lower reply rates from women when they wrote more positively worded messages.

"That was a surprising finding—I was not expecting that," Bruch said. "That behavior resonated with pickup artist strategies" such as negging, a kind of emotional manipulation in which someone makes a backhanded compliment to others to erode their confidence and increase their need for approval.

Bruch said one of her graduate students is developing an explanation for why this strategy seems to work.

Another common tactic men and women employed was to send desirable prospects longer messages, but it didn't seem to result in a higher response rate, she said.

There was one exception: Seattle men had the "most pronounced" rise in message length for desirable partners, and the strategy seemed to work, resulting in a higher response rate.

Seattle is also a market where straight men may have to work harder to find a date, the researchers pointed out.

"Seattle presents the most unfavorable dating climate for men, with as many as two men for every woman in some segments of the user population," the study authors wrote.

It seems that people do seek out more desirable partners, but that desirability is closely calibrated to their own attractiveness.

So is everyone doomed to seek mates who are unreachably "out of their league"?

As it turns out, aspirational message-sending does work—not all the time, and less often when the desirability gap is bigger. For men seeking more desirable [women](#), the response rate went as high as 21 percent—high enough that the effort may be worth it, the scientists said.

"One of the take-home messages here is that it might pay to be persistent," Bruch said—to send messages to many desirable users, in hope of getting a response from one of them.

"It seems like even writing 10 messages to find someone you find incredibly desirable is a pretty modest investment of time and energy," she said.

Bruch also pointed to other research indicating that, essentially, people are at their most superficial in the earliest stages of when they meet, and begin to value other characteristics as they get to know each other.

"If that's true, then what we would expect is that these desirability differences matter most in this first message and reply, and then the desirability gap ceases to be as important in determining whether people move on to the next stage," she said.

Perhaps studying the number of follow-up messages, or the contents of the replies, could start to shed more light on that dynamic, Bruch said.

In the meantime, Bruch said the findings from Seattle—where men wrote longer messages and were also rewarded for it, in contrast to New York, Boston and Chicago—has inspired her to look deeper into the differences in dating experiences between different cities.

More information: E.E. Bruch et al., "Aspirational pursuit of mates in online dating markets," *Science Advances* (2018). [DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.aap9815](https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aap9815) , advances.sciencemag.org/content/4/8/eaap9815

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