

The Effects of Height and Social Status on
Women's Mating Preferences

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Abstract

Evolutionary psychology has been used frequently to research evolved psychological mechanisms influenced by natural selection (Tadinac & Hromatko, 2004). According to Chang, Wang, Shackelford, and Buss, (2011) evolutionary theory has played a role in understanding both social and biological mechanisms. Of these social and biological mechanisms, male-female interactions are of the most interest for this research. The purpose of this research is to explore the significance of evolutionary theory on modern day mating decisions of women. Participants (N=44) were Caucasian and were selected on a volunteer basis from a private liberal arts college in the Northeastern United States. Participants were brought into a classroom at the university and were asked to complete a questionnaire on dating profiles to test for perceived attractiveness. The mean attractiveness score for tall males ($M = 1.43$, $SD = .514$) was higher than both average males ($M = .47$, $SD = 1.125$) and short males ($M = 1.00$, $SD = .785$). Additionally, the mean attractiveness score for high status males ($M = 1.43$, $SD = .646$) was higher than both average males ($M = .88$, $SD = 1.147$) and low-status males ($M = .62$, $SD = 1.044$). The results for height were significant while the results for status were not. The results for height were consistent with previous research that indicated women show preference for increased height (Gahtan & Mark, 2013; Pierce, 1996), while the results for status were inconsistent with previous research that indicated women show preference for increased status (Feingold, 1992, Castro et al., 2014, Lee et al., 2014).

Key words: sexual selection, women's mating, online dating, evolutionary psychology, height, social status

Evolutionary psychology has been used frequently to research evolved psychological mechanisms influenced by natural selection (Tadinac & Hromatko, 2004). More importantly, evolutionary psychology has played an important role in both identifying and understanding universal psychological traits among the modern day population (Gangestad, Haselton, & Buss, 2006). According to Chang, Wang, Shackelford, and Buss (2011), evolutionary theory has played a role in understanding both social and biological mechanisms. Of these social and biological mechanisms, male-female interactions are of the most interest for this research. Despite the frequency and importance of these interactions, very few individuals are knowledgeable about their evolutionary

background. The purpose of this research is to explore the significance of evolutionary theory on modern day mating decisions.

Sexual Selection

Darwin defined sexual selection as "1) competition within one sex for members of the opposite sex, and 2) differential choice by members of one sex for members of the opposite sex" (Trivers, 1972, p. 137). Familiar models of sexual selection emphasize the coexistence and coevolution of a trait in one sex and the preference for that same trait in the other (van den Berg, Fawcett, Buunk, & Weissing, 2013). Sexual selection can result

in behavioural differences between sexes (Patridge, Boettcher, & Jones, 2013). For example, males may prefer some features when looking for a mate, while females may prefer others. While there are some traits that are universally desired during sexual selection, there are many more traits that are primarily desired by one sex in the other. These traits will be discussed in further detail when discussing male vs. female mating strategies. In addition, sexual selection predicts that the sex that invests the most in offspring should be choosier (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Russock, 2011). This concept relates to Parental Investment Theory.

Parental Investment Theory

Parental Investment Theory can be defined as the investment a parent must make in an individual offspring to increase their chances of survival and ultimate reproductive success. This is done at the cost of the same parent's ability to invest in other offspring (Trivers, 1972). According to Buss and Schmitt (1993), Trivers proposed the following two links between parental investment and sexual selection: "(a) The sex that invests more in offspring should be more choosy or discriminating about who they mate with (intersexual interaction), and (b) the sex that invests less in offspring should compete more vigorously for access to valuable high-investing members of the opposite sex (intrasexual competition)" (p. 206).

Popular belief among researchers and theorists would indicate that biological differences between the sexes articulate which gender is required to invest more than the other (Feingold, 1992). This ultimately refers to females' obligation to carry offspring for many months and nurse after birth, while males share no such obligation (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Even in the modern era males have little to no obligation to their genetic offspring if they choose not to participate in their upbringing (with the exception of child support). Because females' minimal costs are so much greater than males', females are motivated to be more selective when choosing a mate (Sacco, Young, Brown, Bernstein, & Hugenberg, 2012). Although humans are generally highly selective (Verweij, Burri, and Zietsch, 2014), it is more important to realize in this context that females, more so than males, display high selectivity when choosing a mate.

Mate Selection

Mate selection is a concept that stems from the overarching theme of sexual selection. Mate selection is defined as the interaction between male and female respective sexual strategies, or solutions to adaptive problems. These strategies evolved in response to the different problems males and females encounter in search of short- and long-term mates (Khalid, 2005). Simply put, mate selection explores how various factors shape what is desirable in a mate (Salska et al., 2008). Buss and Schmitt (1993) add that these strategies occur without conscious awareness. The subconscious mind then has two main concerns when trying to solve reproductive problems: 1) how to signal mate value, and 2) how to interpret the mate value of others (Krupp, 2008).

Mate Value

The concept of mate value is ultimately based on the assumption that individuals that possess desirable traits will have greater reproductive success (Hromatko, Bajoghli, Rebernjak, Joshaghani, & Tadinac, 2015). Research on mate value generally states that in order for mating situations to be successful, mate values of each individual should be proximal to one another. This is because individuals with the self-perception that they have a higher mate value than their partner are less satisfied in their relationship than individuals with lower or similar mate values as their partner (Hromatko et al., 2015). Ultimately, understanding one's own mate value aids in understanding how to optimize the investment of time and energy one brings into a mating situation (Castro, Hattori, Yamamoto, & de Araujo Lopes, 2014).

Female vs. Male Mating Strategies

Feingold (1992) demonstrates the differentiation between males' and females' desirable qualities, arguing that the qualities most likely to influence mate selection in either, or both, of the sexes, are: physical attractiveness, socioeconomic status, intelligence, character (honesty, etc.), personality, and sense of humor. From an evolutionary psychology standpoint, it is widely recognized that females, more so than males, value economic resources in a long-term mate cross-culturally (Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, & Larsen, 2001). This mirrors the current pattern of mating preference, suggesting that

females value a wide variety of attributes that contribute to a higher social status (economic resources, occupation, assets, etc.). Males, on the other hand, assign greater value to physical features that contribute to attractiveness (Castro et al., 2014). This is because “human fertility is sharply age-graded” (p. 678) so males seek females who are able to bear offspring, while females seek males capable and willing to invest in offspring (Chang et al., 2011).

Females are also known to be more attracted to males with characteristics that demonstrate genetic quality (Gildersleeve, Haselton, & Fales, 2014). These traits include, but are not limited to: bodily symmetry, a masculine face, social presence, and intersexual competitiveness. Along with these characteristics, females also specifically show preference for height (Gahtan & Mark, 2013). In a 1984 study conducted by Koestner and Wheeler, as cited in Pierce (1996), data from a singles magazine suggested that males who advertised their tallness on dating profiles were more likely to receive responses than those who reported being short. This is because height, among the cues previously listed, are attributes associated with fitness and health, which is desirable to pass on to offspring (Gangestad et al., 2006).

Despite the abundance of research confirming a wide variety of desirable traits for each respective gender, no single trait can determine how an individual will mate. Single traits, however, can contribute to the overall process of selection when mating. This is because human mating is particularly complex. According to Lee, Dubbs, Hippel, Brooks, and Zietsch (2014), “in even the simplest of animal mating systems, the outcome of mate choice can depend on a suite of variables. [Additionally,] mate choice among humans is more complex than in almost any other species” (p. 193). For these reasons, mating strategies can be broken down into two subcategories: long-term and short-term.

Long Term vs. Short Term Mating Strategies

The type of mating situation becomes an important factor in mate selection. Long-term mating can be described as mating and engaging in sexual activity where the relationship is highly likely to continue, whereas short-term mating is described as engaging in sexual activity where the relationship is not likely to continue (Wiederman & Dubois, 1998). In each case individuals seek different traits in the opposite sex. For example,

Buss and Schmitt (1993) state that historically, males pursued short-term mating strategies with the goal of increasing number of offspring. On the other hand, males historically pursued long-term mating strategies with the goal of “monopolizing a woman’s lifetime reproductive resources” (p. 214). Additionally, long-term mating may offer long-term benefits such as economic cooperation and alliances with the female’s kin (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). It has also been suggested that females pursuing short-term mating strategies will look for physical traits associated with genetic fitness, while females pursuing long-term strategies will look for traits related to economic stability and status (Li, 2007).

While short-term and long-term mating strategies generally differ from one another with little crossover, there is one particular instance where short-term and long-term mating strategies do not follow the observed trend: during ovulation. During ovulation, traits that are more valuable in long-term mating situations, like resources, are not more desired by females. However, traits that would be more beneficial for offspring in a short-term mating situation, such as good genes and health, are more desired by females during this time (Gangestad et al., 2006). During ovulation, females desire to reproduce and in turn are attracted to traits that will contribute to genetic fitness as opposed to stability and resources provided by a mate.

Current Research

Mating is a key function of human interaction. In order to understand humans from a psychological and sociological point of view, research has been readily done on mating strategies (Wiederman & Dubois, 1998). According to Feingold (1992), studies have used questionnaires as a means to rank and/or rate the importance of a variety of qualities. However, this type of research has very rarely been applied to the realm of online dating, which is a pertinent issue to consider since technology has recently provided a means for mate selection to occur online, instead of in the traditional face-to-face method. According to Manning (2014), dating websites are netting millions of dollars each year and growing. In 2004, these websites generated a total of \$470 million dollars in the US alone, which was up from \$40 million in 2001. This same report estimated that 16 million individuals were using these services. Three years later, net profit was up to \$900 million with a projected 20-

22% increase in active members using these services. This shift now makes mate selection extremely accessible provided individuals have access to a device that connects to the Internet. These statistics do not include the use of free social media sites for mate selection, only paid services (e.g. eHarmony and match.com)

The increased usage of online dating raises two primary questions: 1) Will individuals continue to look for the same qualities in a mate in an online dating environment as they would in a traditional dating environment? 2) How much value do individuals place on certain qualities? Lee et al. (2014) conducted a study in which participants rated the attractiveness of dating profiles based on a variety of variables: facial masculinity/femininity, facial attractiveness, and intelligence. The researchers found that females rated the profiles more favorably when the profile provided a more intellectual individual, or an individual with greater facial masculinity. Interestingly enough, according to Gahtan and Mark (2013), “[females] are also more likely to respond to personal ads that report a taller height of the poster” (p. 123).

In Lee et al.’s (2014) study, female participants gave higher ratings to more masculine faces and more intelligent profiles. However, this study tested multiple variables, and although the results were significant, it is difficult to say which variable, or which interaction of variables, was the true cause of this effect. The researchers manipulated the profiles based on facial attractiveness, perceived facial masculinity/femininity, as well as intelligence. Moreover, the researchers randomly asked participants to consider either a short- or long-term mating situation. It is well known that short- and long-term mating situations involve different goals, which may have affected how the participants responded to the profile. Based on evolutionary mating theory, it is reasonable to assume that females asked to consider a short-term mating situation responded more favourably to cues of attractiveness (facial masculinity), while females asked to consider long-term mating situations responded more favourably to cues toward social status and economic stability (intelligence).

Additionally, while the researchers attempted to control for the image by finding images that were considered equally attractive or unattractive prior to changing the facial structures, it is not certain that each individual found each image equally attractive. In this type of study, methodology, more specifically, control, is especially important to consider in order to test for the in-

tended variable. While it is difficult to generate many different profiles with images that will be congruent to one another initially, it is important that the images remain fairly similar in order to ensure the manipulation of the image, and not the individual photographed, contributes to the results. This is partially because mate selection is not based on one characteristic or quality, but instead is based on a coalition of many different characteristics or qualities. This is also partially because each individual is different, and although there are general theories that can apply universally to females, each female will also have specific criteria that she looks for in a mate based on her personality, lifestyle, and upbringing (Meltzer, McNulty, Jackson, & Karney, 2014).

This study aims to explore the effects of height and social status on desirability as reported by university-aged females via dating profiles. It was hypothesized that females would show greater preference for taller males and for males with increased social status in mating situations. The independent variables, height and social status, can be represented through quantifiable measures such as feet and inches for height, and projected income for social status. In addition, social status can be defined through education level, hobbies, and career path as they relate to income level. As education level rises, career paths tend to be more competitive with higher salaries. Hobbies of individuals with higher social status will differ from those with lower social status. The dependent variable, desirability, can be measured through survey responses.

Method

Participants

Participants ($N=44$) were selected on a volunteer basis from a private liberal arts college in the Northeastern United States. Participants were all Caucasian, female, and undergraduate students. Of the 44 participants, one individual’s data was excluded due to sexual orientation (homosexual). All of the remaining participants ($n=43$) were either heterosexual ($n=40$) or bisexual ($n=3$). The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 24, with a mean age of 19.5. The participant pool was almost split equally in regards to birth control use, with 22 participants using birth control and 21 participants not using birth control. All participants with the exception of three were in regular phases of their menstrual cycle (menstrual, follicular, ovulatory or luteal). All identities were kept

anonymous and participants were treated in accordance with APA ethical guidelines.

Materials

PowerPoint slide printouts (6 total) designed to resemble dating profiles were provided to test for perceived attractiveness. Profiles included a photo, occupation, age, height, and hobbies. Age was consistent throughout each profile as a means of control. Additionally, to further control for confounding variables, the only manipulation on the profile was the variable being tested. Height was operationally defined and quantified by feet and inches, and status was operationally defined through occupation and hobbies, which could be quantified through implied salary; individuals with higher status occupations are more likely to bring in a larger salary and have higher status hobbies than those with low-status occupations.

Profiles testing for a height effect had identical images, occupations, ages, and hobbies, with height manipulated to create tall (T), average (A), and short (S) profiles. The height breakdown for each condition was as follows: (T) 6'3, (A) 5'10, and (S) 5'5. Profiles testing for a status effect had identical images, ages, and heights, with both occupation and hobbies manipulated to create high-status (HS), average-status (AS), and low-status (LS) profiles. The occupation breakdown for each condition was as follows: (HS) Pre-Medical student at Yale University, (AS) Marketing student at State University of New York (SUNY) Canton, and (LS) high school graduate with a part time job as a mechanic.

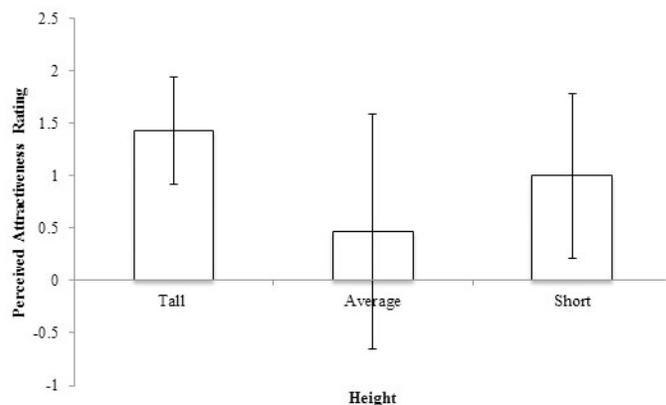
Additionally, in order to emulate a real dating profile situation, two different stock images of the same Caucasian male model were used: one for the height variable and one for the status variable. To clarify, each condition of the height variable used an image of the model in one outfit at a certain angle and each condition of the status variable used an image of the same model in another outfit taken from a different angle. The same model was used for each photo as a means of control.

A questionnaire was used to quantify perceived attractiveness as indicated by participants. Perceived attractiveness was scored on a 5 point Likert-type scale (“-2: Not Attracted” to “2: Very Attracted”). Neutral scores were allocated a zero. Following the Likert-type scale, demographics were asked to better understand the participant pool. Questions concerning age, class level

(Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior), sexual orientation, birth control status (currently taking or currently not taking), and finally, menstrual cycle regularity and stage were asked to facilitate further statistical analysis.

Procedure

Participants ($N=44$) were brought into a classroom on a volunteer basis at the university and were given an informed consent form, which notified them of their role as participants and their right to terminate their participation at any time. Participants needed to be 18 years or older to give consent. A researcher administered the questionnaire to participants and participants were asked to complete the demographic questions. Upon completion of the demographics, a researcher administered the first dating profile to the participant and asked the participant to review the dating profile and provide a rating for overall perceived attractiveness based on the scale provided. After rating the first profile, the researcher collected the first profile and administered the second and final profile to the participant. To control for order, each participant was randomly assigned one profile testing for height and one profile testing for status. The order was randomized with a random number generator. After reviewing and rating the two profiles, participants were



debriefed according to APA ethical guidelines and were thanked for their participation. This procedure was repeated for all participants.

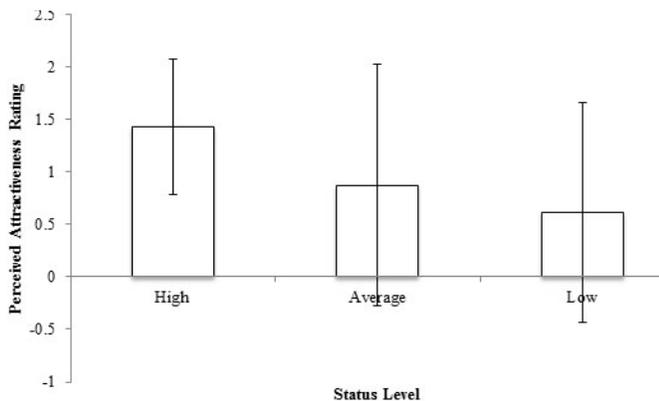
Results

A one-way ANOVA was used to test the hypothesis that females would show greater preference for taller males and therefore rate their perceived attractiveness

higher than their shorter counterparts. The mean attractiveness score for tall males ($M = 1.43$, $SD = .514$) was higher than both average males ($M = .47$, $SD = 1.125$) and short males ($M = 1.00$, $SD = .785$) as seen in Figure 1. There was a significant difference, $F_{(2, 40)} = 4.63$, $p = .016$.

Figure 1. Means and standard deviations of the attractiveness scores for tall, average, and short males.

Tukey's post-hoc test was used to determine which groups differed significantly. The post-hoc test showed



that the participants were significantly more attracted to tall males over average height males ($M = .96$, $SD = .317$, $p = .012$). However, the post-hoc showed that the participants were not significantly more attracted to either tall males over short males ($M = .43$, $SD = .323$, $p = .388$), or average height males over short males ($M = -.53$, $SD = .317$, $p = .225$).

A one-way ANOVA was used to test the hypothesis stating that females would show greater preference for males of higher status and therefore rate their perceived attractiveness higher than their lower-status counterparts. The mean attractiveness score for high status males ($M = 1.43$, $SD = .646$) was higher than both average males ($M = .88$, $SD = 1.147$) and low-status males ($M = .62$, $SD = 1.044$) as seen in Figure 2. There was not a significant difference, $F_{(2, 40)} = 2.47$, $p = .098$.

Figure 2. Means and standard deviations of the attractiveness scores for high, average, and low-status males.

Tukey's post-hoc test was used to determine which groups, if any, differed significantly. The post-hoc test showed that the participants were not significantly more attracted to either high-status males over average males

($M = .55$, $SD = .358$, $p = .280$), high-status males over low-status males ($M = .81$, $SD = .377$, $p = .091$), or average males over low-status males ($M = .26$, $SD = .365$, $p = .758$).

Discussion

The hypothesis stating that females would show preference for taller males in a mating situation was supported by the data. This is consistent with the literature (Gahtan & Mark, 2013; Pierce 1996) and evolutionary theories that suggest females show preference for masculine features such as increased height. Traits demonstrating genetic fitness are particularly important, as they show the ability to protect and provide. According to Mandal (2012), indication of genetic quality can be represented through both bodily and behavioral traits. Furthermore, physical traits such as height and build/stature are considered among the pool of good genes that signal both health and even higher social status. Contributing to this, Gildersleeve et al. (2014) found that females show preference for genetic quality specifically during mating. Additionally, both Gahtan and Mark (2013) and Koestner and Wheeler (as cited in Pierce 1996) found that females were more likely to respond to personal ads with taller heights indicated on the profile than those with shorter heights.

However, the hypothesis stating that females would show preference for males with higher status was not supported by the data. Although there is a wide variety of research (Feingold, 1992, Castro et al., 2014, Lee et al., 2014) as well as evolutionary theories that would support the hypothesis, there was no significant difference in this experiment. This could be for a variety of reasons. First, the sample was relatively small, and although there was a significant difference for the height variable, the lack of participants could have made an impact in the results regarding the status variable. Moreover, the sample was exclusively Caucasian, and while this reflects the majority of the population at the researched institution, this does not reflect the population of the United States as a whole, or even the New England region of the United States. To strengthen the findings a more diverse sample is required, as these findings cannot be generalized to more diverse populations with certainty.

Secondly, demographic questions did not ask what income level or what area (rural, suburban, or urban) the participant could most accurately identify with. This is

extremely important to consider because of mate value. According to Castro et al. (2014) individuals who perceive themselves as having a low mate value, or coming from an area where individuals are considered to have a low mate value, believe they are less likely to get married. These individuals are less likely to pursue those of higher mate values due to fear of rejection. This is an important factor to consider concerning the lack of support for the status hypothesis because the results may have occurred because individuals were more attracted to profiles with mate values similar to their own.

Furthermore, the type of mating situation (short or long-term) was not specified prior to asking participants to rate the respective profiles. Lee et al. (2014) have previously shown that females value qualities differently depending on the mating situation. In long-term mating situations, females show preference for traits such as status and resources, which could translate into provisions for the female and her future offspring. On the other hand, in short-term mating situations, females show preference for qualities that demonstrate good genes like masculinity, good health, etc. (Gangestad et al., 2006).

In terms of methodology and control, a variety of changes could have been made to make the study stronger. First, while a photograph is a central characteristic of a dating profile, the photo may have led participants to judge the attractiveness of the profile based more on the image than the characteristics described. If the individual immediately found the individual in the image to be unattractive or only slightly attractive, this could cause participants to report scores not based on the variable being tested, or worse, not even read the details at all.

Lee et al.'s (2014) study also used photographs as part of their testing materials (online dating profiles). In this study, the researchers used the photographs as part of their manipulation, changing the facial masculinity/femininity for females and males, respectively. Lee et al. (2014) also tested for a variety of characteristics and controlled for the image dictating the first impressions of the profile by having participants test 32 different profiles with different photos as opposed to just two. In future studies, multiple profiles should be created as a means to control for initial impressions being dictated by the photo alone and not the variable being tested. Omitting a photo completely, while taking away from the traditional set up of a dating profile, is another way to eliminate this confounding variable.

Second, more dating profiles could have been created so that the participant was asked to rate multiple profiles on status and multiple profiles on height as opposed to just one and one. Implementing multiple profiles to test for the same variable would provide more data to analyze, which could potentially strengthen the effects and make the study more generalizable. As of now, although there was a height effect, there is no sure way of knowing whether or not this is true for all dating profiles or just the ones administered to the participants. To further generalize this research, females from multiple colleges should be tested.

Implications of this study can benefit individuals seeking a mate as well as researchers interested in studying the effect technology has on mating preferences. Males can use this information to not only understand what characteristics are more preferable for women seeking a mate, but females can use this information to understand their innate tendencies with respect to mating, especially as these tendencies pertain to short- and long-term mating situations. This study explored one variable associated with each mating strategy, and although mating strategies were not specified by the researchers to the participants, this is an improvement that can be made in a future study. Researchers hoping to gain more knowledge about the effect of technology on mating can use this research as a starting point to explore whether dating environments play a factor in an individual's strategy.

Conducting research regarding mating strategies is extremely important for gaining an appropriate understanding of social mechanisms and male-female interactions. Since almost every individual participates in a mating activity at least once throughout their lifetime (Khallad, 2005), mating is not only an important evolutionary concept to understand, but it is also a concept that is nearly universally applicable.

Future research should continue to explore female mating preferences as they pertain to an online setting. This is because online dating has become increasingly popular, and very little research has been done to consider this environment. While mating theories provide some key concepts pertaining to female mate preferences, there is little evidence to support that these concepts are equally valued in an online setting. Moreover, in the future, researchers may want to give details (height, status, etc.) first and then administer a photo to see if these details influence females' perceptions of the profiles, or

simply not administer a photo at all and see if a stronger effect can be obtained by just providing the participants with a written statement and no visual cue.

When conducting future research, researchers should be sure to use adequate controls and provide multiple different profiles to a wider demographic of participants to increase generalizability. Additionally, researchers should specify which type of mating situation participants are rating the profile on to see if certain variables are seen as more favourable in long- vs. short-term mating. Eventually, research should be conducted on this topic cross-culturally to see if online mate selection preferences are the same in Western and non-Western cultures to increase generalizability and to further test the importance of online dating across cultures.

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