

**Jagger, E (2005) "Is thirty the new sixty?" Dating, Age and Gender in a Postmodern, Consumer Society, *Sociology*. Volume 39(1):89-106**

Many people now use newspapers, magazines, dating agencies and a range of electronic media for the purpose of meeting a partner. Jagger suggests that dating advertisements are a revealing site for examining the social construction of identities. Previous research has suggested, for instance, that age is an important source of identity in that the majority of people advertising for partners mention their age. Based on a content analysis of 1094 dating advertisements in newspapers, this research aimed to examine how age and gender combine to influence the age at which people advertise, and the extent to which age remains an important source of identity for men and women. In short, Jagger aimed to explore the social significance of age and how this is shaped by gender in the context of a dating market place.

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Dating advertisements were taken from two newspapers in Scotland, *The Herald* and *The Scotsman*, and two with a readership throughout Britain, *The Guardian* and *The Independent*. The choice of newspapers was made to reflect the fact that dating advertising is a mainly middle class activity and readers of these newspapers belong mainly to this social group. Advertisements were sampled over a four-week period, the first two weeks of March and May 1996. Repeat advertisements and those for gay and group relationships were eliminated from the sample, producing a final sample of 1094 adverts. The two variables of gender and age were central to this research project. For the purpose of the content analysis, gender was operationalised as male and female. In terms of analysing age differences, Jagger operationalised the sample into 3 age categories: the young (under 35 years), a mid-age group (35-44 years) and an older age group (45 years and over). A systematic content analysis was then carried out, producing quantitative data about the intersection of gender and age in dating advertisements; data was collated on who advertises, who is looking for whom, and what their relative age preferences are in advertising for the desired partner.

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Before carrying out the research, Jagger made a number of hypotheses; for example, she hypothesised that:

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- Compared to women, men advertise at a younger age and women advertise at an older age.
- Men seek younger women in their adverts.
- Some women actively seek a partner younger than themselves.

Of the total sample of 1094 advertisers, 61% (670) were men and 39% (424) were women. Hence, it is statistically significant that men are more likely than women to advertise for a partner. Moreover, it appears from the data that their own age continues to be a significant source of identity for both men and women, with 86% of the sample mentioning their age, 64% of whom were men and 36% women. With regard to the age at which individuals use self-advertising, the mean age for men was 35 years, whereas the mean age for women was 39 years. In terms of age groupings on the whole, the younger one is, the more likely one will advertise. Jagger also collected data on age differences in relation to prospective partners:

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*Desired age of prospective partner*

Desired age (years)	All (number)	%	Men (number)	%	Women (number)	%
Under 35	239	44	191	58	48	23
35-44	182	34	100	31	82	39
45 and over	116	22	36	11	80	38
<b>Total</b>	<b>537</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>327</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>210</b>	<b>100</b>

In her concluding remarks, Jagger notes that there have been few cultural changes in the traditional ideas about the expected relative ages of men and women in relationships. It would be safe to conclude that although a postmodern society may well be a consumer society, people's choices may still be controlled by traditional norms and values.

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