

ONLY THE SLIGHTLY IMPERFECT NEED APPLY

A Scientific Look at the Deeply Self-Satisfied World of Personal Ads

In the early days of personal classified advertising, editors may have puzzled over whether to put the ads in the For Sale or the Help Wanted section. In the last decade or so, though, personal ads have become a publishing institution. Which suggests that there has been an explosion in the number of self-described "witty," "smart," "original," "creative" people who unfortunately don't have the time to be witty, smart, original or creative, at least in the personal ads they write.

The vast personal-ad landscape is like Lake Wobegon—where all the women are strong and the men good-looking. But the specific nature of the superiority varies from publication to publication. To simplify the process of finding a mate while checking the movie listings, we fed 60 ads seeking men and 60 ads seeking women into a powerful computer and came up with the archetypal personal ad for each of three publications we intend to look at when we begin to feel "hungry for commitment."*

New York Magazine

SUCCESSFUL MD—35, handsome, fit, gentle, likes theater and fine dining, seeks attractive, intelligent, caring woman for serious relationship. Photo, please.

FUN-LOVING, SLIM, BRIGHT—Female professional, 42, very pretty, loves good music, seeks warm Jewish man, 39–53, with sense of humor, for a committed relationship. Photo.

The New York Review of Books

HANDSOME PROFESSOR—DWM, 47, NYC area, warm, enjoys classical music and ballet. I seek a bright, loving, very attractive woman, 35–45, for a sincere, evolving relationship.

ATTRACTIVE, SMART PROFESSIONAL—SWF, 43, loves life and the arts, seeks divorced or widowed man, 45–55, with a good sense of humor who enjoys music. For mutual support through life's daily struggles.

The Village Voice

SWM businessman, 38, 5'10", handsome, sincere, enjoys traveling. Seeks warm F, 25–35, for intimate encounters. Photo, please.

SWF, 32, tall, attractive, bright and affectionate. Seeks sincere, intelligent SM for growing & challenging relationship. Photo, please.

—Seth Roberts

*Each average is based on 20 randomly selected ads. First, the contents of each ad were reduced to five categories: Me, You, Age, Us (what we will do together) and Reply (the type of reply desired). Then the contents of these categories were sorted into narrower subcategories. The Me and You categories, for instance, were each sorted into Résumé, Looks, Personality, Likes and Other. Then, wherever possible, the subcategories were divided. The contents of Résumé were sorted into Marital Status, Religion, Race, Job, Income, Smoking Status, Education and so on; Looks was divided into Overall Attractiveness, Shape, Height and so on; Personality was divided into Intelligence, Sense of Humor, Confidence, Psychiatric Status, Treatment of Others, Energy, Social Intelligence, Politics and Other. When the sorting was finished, the average number of items in each of the broadest categories (Me, You, etc.) was determined. Then, the average number of items in each subcategory (Résumé, etc.) was determined. Then, for each subcategory, the most popular subsubcategories were chosen, based on the average number of items per ad in the subcategory. For each of the chosen subsubcategories, the most frequent or the median item was determined. Warning: Doing such calculations in a café may be embarrassing.

"GLENN CLOSE LOOK-ALIKE SEEKS MICHAEL DOUGLAS TYPE"

Lines from Actual New York Personal Ads We Never Answered

"[I'm a] Prince Charles look-alike"

"[I have a] Roseanne Barr type of body"

"[I'm a] Charles Bronson look-alike"

"[I'm] supposedly a cuter Donald Sutherland type"

"Punch... seeks Manhattan Judy"

"[I have] MTV's Mark Goodman's looks"

"[I'm] compared frequently with Liza Minnelli"

"Jewish 'Ken'... looking for 'Barbie'"

"Cerebral Italian Tarzan... seeks intellectual Jane"

"Goldilox seeks Beardless Jewish Bear"

"Sweet Potato seeks Couch Potato"

"[I'm a] Herman Munster look-alike"

"Cybill Shepherd look-alike... seeks her Addison"

"Loni Anderson look-alike—looking for my Burt Reynolds"

"Totie Fields is back"

"[I'm a] Dustin Hoffman clone (only taller)"

"I'm an aggressive, body-building Bette Midler"

"Female Robinson Crusoe—seeks her man Friday"

"[I have] Billy Joel looks"

"[I'm a] Garry Shandling clone"

"Popeye looking for Olive"

"[I'm an] Arthur Miller look-alike"

"[I'm a] Female Malcolm Forbes"

—Charles Kadoo



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