



Is Thirty the New Sixty? Dating, Age and Gender in a Postmodern, Consumer Society

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ABSTRACT

Based on a content analysis of 1094 advertisements, the article extends the author's previous research on dating by examining how age and gender intersect to influence the age at which people advertise, their choice of partner and how they manage aspects of their age identity. Locating analyses in the context of a postmodern, consumer culture, it shows that young men and older women are most likely to advertise. It reveals that the maintenance of traditional age differentials varies according to age group. It argues that intimations of a reversal in tradition are discernible in that some older women now seek younger men. It concludes that in a culture that gives primacy to youth, assembling an age identity is problematic, not only for women but also for the chronologically young.

KEY WORDS

age / dating advertisements / gender / self-identity

Despite the recent increase in divorce and the dramatic rise in single person households (Equal Opportunities Commission [EOC], 2003) contemporary society still privileges couples and espouses the virtues of 'family values'. The plight of single adults who are without partners, however, remains largely ignored. Those in paid work spend long hours either furthering a career or merely hanging on to an existing job, whilst those without are frequently debarred from normal participation in social life through lack of money and sufficient opportunities for sociability. Hence the notion that 'boy meets girl' with relative ease is, perhaps, an enduring aspect of social mythology. Many people now resort to newspapers, magazines, dating agencies and a range of electronic media for the purpose of meeting a partner. As Coupland (1996) has

pointed out, in a time-pressured, work-centred and mass-mediated society, such methods are 'relationally efficient', a 'natural' response to modern life circumstances. No longer deemed solely the province of the 'sad' or lonely, self-advertising has become a well-established and socially acceptable procedure. For example, in 2002, Match.com, one of the largest international online dating agencies, boasted more than 3.25 million registered users: and DatingDirect.com, the UK's largest web dating service, had more than 350,000 members (Semple, 2002). Statistics suggest that by 2005, 50 percent of singletons will meet a partner on line (France, 2002).

Despite their current popularity, however, dating advertisements remain an under-researched area especially within sociology. Hence little is known about those using such means to establish new relationships nor what they say when producing versions of the self for selective consumption by others in the dating market place. But following Coupland (1996), I suggest that dating advertisements are a revealing site for examining the social construction of identities – identities that are deemed desirable and marketable in a specific cultural context and constituted in normative heterosexuality. As Coupland (1996: 188) has pointed out, given that clear preferences emerge in the selection of characteristics, 'advertisements provide clear insights into advertisers' idealizations of self-identities – for example in terms of physical attributes, age, personalities and interests'. The process of seeking a partner via advertising can be seen as a lifestyle decision. As such, following Chaney (1996), advertisements may generate data of significance to theoretical concerns with the interpretation of social and cultural change.

My earlier research explored gender differences in how advertisers market the self, the attributes they seek in prospective partners, the role of the body in advertisers' discourse and the repetitive but also changing meanings of masculinity and femininity (Jagger, 1998, 2001). The research, however, neglected the age dimension of dating advertisements. Thus the present study aims to remedy this by exploring how age intersects with gender to influence self and other identifications. Specifically, it aims to investigate the extent to which age remains an important identity marker for men and women; to examine gender differences with regard to age at first advertising; to determine whether traditional, normative age differentials between self and prospective partner are maintained by men and women of different age groups; and to examine the degree to which cultural discourses of age influence how individuals manage their age-identity.

The article is organized as follows. Section one critically reviews the existing literature on age and dating showing how my approach can address some of its weaknesses. Section two maps out the theoretical approach and arguments shaping my hypotheses. Section three presents my statistical findings on 'who looks for whom'. Section four analyses how advertisers 'manage' age in a culture dominated by a youthful aesthetic, especially in relation to the body. Section five concludes by discussing the extent to which advertisers can be considered 'postmodern' selves. It should also be pointed out that my methodological

approach (and its limitations) are spelt out at the end of the article. Suffice it to say here that for the purposes of analysis, advertisers were divided into three roughly equal age groupings; 'young' (34 and under), 'mid-age' (35–44) and 'older' (45 plus).

Advertising Age

Existing research suggests that age is an important identity marker in that the majority of advertisers mention the age of the self. For example, Davis (1990) found that 75 percent of individuals referred to their exact age or age range, whilst Coupland (1996) established that 87 percent of her sample included their age. In terms of gender differences, Willis and Carlson (1993) reported that 80 percent of men and 77 percent of women disclosed their age, Montini and Ovrebo (1990) found 83 percent of men and 77 percent of women did so and Bolig et al. (1984) reported 82 percent and 65 percent respectively. The data on the age at which individuals tend to advertise is somewhat contradictory. For instance Davis (1990) found that men tended to be older than women with a mean age of 40.7 years for men compared with a mean age of 39.4 years for women. Similarly, Steinfurst and Moran (1989) found that 50 percent of men fell into the 40–49 or 50–59 age group whereas 50 percent of women were between 30–39 and 40–49 years. By contrast, Cameron et al. (1977) found that female advertisers on average tended to be older than males, 41.1 years as compared with 38.7 years, whilst Willis and Carlson (1993) found that both genders had an average age of 35 years. Hence, no consistent pattern of gender differences in age of the self emerges from the literature. By contrast, with regard to the desired age of partners, a consistent pattern of gender differences is clearly identifiable. Although the prospective partner's age appears to be less significant in that fewer advertisers stipulated this, a general finding of research adopting diverse theoretical frameworks is that men seek younger women whilst women seek older men (Bolig et al., 1984; Cameron et al., 1977; Greenlees and McGrew, 1994; Harrison and Saeed, 1977; Willis and Carlson, 1993). One study has pointed out that the tendency for women to want an older partner declines with age whilst the tendency for men to want someone younger does not (Harrison and Saeed, 1977).

In explaining these gender differences, researchers adopting a Darwinian perspective suggest that men and women have a different 'investment' in reproduction. Although all individuals attempt to maximize their contribution to the gene pool, it is argued, men have only one option, which is to fertilize as many eggs as possible. Hence they seek young, fertile partners with many childbearing years ahead of them. By contrast, women are likely to emphasize the business of child-rearing and hence prefer older men since age may be indicative of resource attainment (Dunbar, 1995; Greenlees and McGrew, 1994). Similarly, research located within a psychological perspective has explained such findings by suggesting that particular 'traits' are considered attractive because of

'sex-role' expectations (Davis, 1990; Deaux and Hanna, 1984; Harrison and Saeed, 1977). That is, youth is a valued 'trait' in women whilst age is a valued 'trait' in men. Those adopting exchange-theory as an explanatory framework suggest that advertisers engage in a process of strategic bargaining, claiming and offering characteristics valued as 'sex-appropriate' in society (Bolig et al., 1984; Cameron et al., 1977). In this view, women offer youth and seek age whereas men seek youth and offer age because this gendered age differential is 'consistent with normative age structures' (Bolig et al., 1984).

Although some of these results are consistent with my data, problems with existing studies can be identified. First, there is a problem of method. The data on gender differences in age of the self, for example, are insufficiently detailed since usually only the average age of male and female advertisers is reported in the literature. Hence there is a tendency to homogenize and universalize the age categories 'man' and 'woman'. We have no indication, for instance, as to whether more young men than older men advertise, or, whether more young women than older women do so. Similarly, we do not know if all men of different age groupings desire younger women and all women, older men. In other words, because the age data in the literature lacks detail, we cannot say whether or not traditional age differentials are maintained for men and women of all ages. Second, there is a problem of theory in that previous research has failed to locate studies in any particular historical, cultural or economic context, tending instead to present a fixed, static and unchanging view of individuals. The problems with evolutionary, psychological and psycho-social perspectives have been spelt out previously (Jagger, 1998). In brief, by failing to explore in sufficient detail the way in which gender interacts with age in particular historical, cultural and social circumstances, all these approaches cannot account for how men and women engage with social changes at different ages, their differing structural positioning and lived experience of age.

In attempting to remedy some of these deficiencies, my objectives in this article are twofold. First, I seek to provide a more detailed analysis of age and gender differences with regard to dating practices. Second, by locating dating advertisements in a specific economic, social and cultural context – that of a postmodern, consumer society – I aim to provide a sociologically informed explanation of any age/gender differences noted.

Theoretical Approach and Argument

Throughout the 20th century, several social transformations, including the decline of British manufacture, the growth of service industries, the rise of the media and advertising and the establishment of a consumer culture, have meant that sources of identity are held to be generated in consumption rather than production (Kellner, 1995). Indeed, according to Giddens (1991), selfhood has become a reflexive project. Freed from the customs and practices of the traditional social order, freed from the fixities of class, gender and age, self-identity

is now fluid, unstable, constituted through a plurality of consumer choices and individual lifestyle decisions. Modern individuality has been replaced by 'persona' to be playfully donned and discarded at will (Shields, 1992). With no rules, only choices, it is argued, everyone can be anyone with fashion, film and the media offering a wealth of subject positions (Kellner, 1995). Immanent to consumer culture, however, is a new relationship between body and self. As Featherstone (1991) has pointed out, the body has become the visible carrier of the self with youth, beauty and slenderness now promoted as universal consumer images. As society becomes more open, moreover, sexual relationships are held to be more equal with individuals experiencing a 'pure-relationship', one pursued for its own sake and sustained through mutual satisfaction (Giddens, 1991, 1992).

Several problems however, can be identified with these ideas. First, it can be argued that postmodern theorists have paid insufficient attention to the social variables of gender and age, and how these intersect to influence consumer choices and lifestyle decisions. Featherstone and Giddens, for instance, tend to imply that consumer culture impinges on modern individuals in a homogenous, universal manner and, by extension, that men and women of all ages share the same lived experience of cultural change. For example, with regard to men, they ignore the fact that men too participate unevenly in consumer culture. It is no longer possible to speak of men as a unified, homogenous group (Connell, 1995). The category 'men' collapses together a number of significant differences between men of different ages (Hearn, 1995). It has been intimated, for instance, that young manhood is a time of ontological insecurity with notions of a 'crisis in masculinity' dominating the 1990s. Changing forms of work, talk of underachieving boys and deserting fathers, the boom in male cosmetics and plastic surgery – all testify to a fundamental shift to a society in which men can no longer rely on an allotted place. As Faludi (1999) has pointed out, young men, much later than young women, now have to find a foothold on the shiny surface of an image-based culture where appearance, sex appeal and celebrity are what counts. Those without the luck, the looks or the time, have never had it so bad. Whilst it has been established that more men than women seek partners via self-advertising (Jagger, 1998), I hypothesize here that they will do so at a younger age and that men will predominate in the young age group.

Older men, however, often 'hold the reins' of organizational power (Hearn, 1995) or have other sources of status and authority. Although the qualification levels of young men and women are now very similar, men are better qualified overall (EOC, 2000a) with the gender pay gap remaining as it was 25 years ago (EOC, 2003). Thus, despite the fact that 'youth' signifies virility, sexuality and physical strength, despite some potential reduction in physical capital, an older masculine identity remains realizable as cultural capital, legitimated as symbolic capital and exchanged as economic capital. I hypothesize therefore that the tendency of men to seek younger women will remain unchanged.

Although the context for marketing the self differs for men and women, gender differences are much less pronounced for young women, particularly those without children. They are used to being judged on their looks, the legacy of feminism has transformed their attitudes and aspirations and they have achieved significant amounts of cultural capital, out-performing men at school and comprising 52 percent of all full-time graduates in 1996–7 (EOC, 2000b). McRobbie (1996) has also identified new, bold, even brazen forms of sexual conduct amongst girls, a determination to meet their male counterparts on equal terms. Girls have also become subjects of their own pleasure developing new modes of sociability that rely less on having a man – the ‘girls’ night out’ and eating out together being just two examples. I hypothesize therefore that together with their financial successes in the labour market, this might mean that many young women are in a sufficiently strong position to use means other than self-advertising in order to meet men; and delay doing so until later. In short, I hypothesize that young women are less likely than young men to advertise and to do so at an older age.

Moreover, according to the British Panel Survey, another sexual revolution is underway affecting women in their thirties and beyond. Middle-class women, the survey revealed, vastly more economically and sexually independent than their mothers, are turning to ‘toyboys’ with the number of women living with younger men doubling between 1990 and 2000 from 12 percent to 25 percent (Harlow and Mulkerrins, 2002). Hence I hypothesize that in reverse of traditional age differentials, some women might actively seek a partner younger than themselves.

A further problem is that in their discussions of reflexivity, postmodern theorists may have overestimated the degree of agency enjoyed by women, ignoring the constraints on some to ‘choose’ a desirable other. Whilst some women might be both willing and able to choose partners on other than economic grounds and participate in a ‘pure relationship’, such freedoms may not be so readily available to all, particularly older women. According to the EOC (2000a), the complex interaction of gender with occupational choice and having children means that gender inequality persists over the lifecycle. Only one third of women in the 35–54 age group are in full-time employment, and 30 percent of women over 45 have no qualifications compared with 20 percent of men (EOC, 2000a). In 1998, 25 percent of all families with dependent children were headed by a lone parent, over 90 percent of whom were women. I hypothesize therefore that older women will be more likely to advertise than same-aged men and continue to seek financial security through their relationship with older, resource-rich men.

Third, although postmodern theorists have claimed that fixed status categories including age have now broken down, their assertions remain theoretically argued for rather than empirically validated. Thus the study sought to explore the extent to which age remains an important identity marker – both when individuals market the self and in their buying mode.

Finally, whilst discussing a novel relationship between body and self, authors such as Giddens have little to say about the ageing body. But advertising encourages social actors to reflect upon their ageing corporeal self in anticipation of meeting partners face to face, should their advertisements prove successful. As Turner (1995) has pointed out, age is an aspect of self-identity in that ageing forces upon individuals a necessary reflexivity since the self is always subject to change, bodies are not infinitely renewable and time is indelibly written on the body. Thus a substantial part of the study aimed to investigate how individuals manage their ageing, embodied self in a culture that idealizes youth and the youthful body and in which the dominant discourses construct age negatively implying norms of decline, physical decrepitude and increasing cultural irrelevance (Tulle-Winton, 2000). Persuaded that the body is infinitely perfectible and preservable with appropriate 'body work', any 'bodily betrayals' accompanying ageing can lead to a charge of moral failure, a reduction in symbolic capital and a devaluation of the self (Featherstone, 1991). I hypothesize therefore that older advertisers, who are likely to construe the embodied self as 'less valuable', would qualify their age statements – in some way emphasizing their essential youthfulness. I also hypothesize that this might be particularly true of women, given what Sontag (1978) has described as the 'double standard of ageing' whereby ageism and sexism combine to require women to match up to an adolescent ideal all their lives with few positive cultural images of older women available (Arber and Ginn, 1995).

These ideas provided the framework for my exploration of the social significance of age and how this is shaped by gender in the context of a dating market place.

Who is Desperately Seeking Whom?

Age and the Self

Of the total sample of 1094 advertisers, 61 percent (670) were men and 39 percent (424) were women (see Table 1). Hence men are statistically significantly more likely than women to advertise for a partner ($p < 0.0001$, 2df). Moreover, it appears from the data that age of the self continues to be a significant aspect of identity for both men and women, with 86 percent of the sample mentioning their age, 64 percent of whom were men and 36 percent women. Hence men are more likely than women to mention their age or age range. With regard to the age at which individuals resort to self-advertising, the mean age of the sample was 36.4 years, the median 35 years and the mode 32 years. But there was also a gender difference here. The mean age for men was 35 years, the median 34 years and the mode 32 years, whereas the mean age for women was 39 years, the median 38 years and the mode 39 years. Hence men on the whole tend to be younger than women when they advertise.

Table 1 Who advertises? Summary of age and gender differences

Age group	All		Men		Women	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Young (34 and under)	392	42	287	48	105	31
Mid (35–44)	316	34	202	34	114	33
Old (45 and over)	232	25	110	18	122	36
Total	940	101	599	100	341	100

Note: Not all columns add to 100% due to rounding up

With regard to the distribution of advertisers into age groupings, the younger one is, the more likely one will advertise (Table 1). What is more interesting, however, is the intersection of age with gender. As Table 1 shows, although mid-age men and women were equally likely to advertise, young men were more likely to advertise than young women – a gender difference which is reversed in the older age group where women predominate.

Age Differences: Prospective Partners

The age of prospective partners appeared to be of less significance to advertisers with approximately half the sample, 49 percent, mentioning this. Most advertisers wanted someone in the young age group, 44 percent (see Table 2). But there is also a significant gender difference here ($p < 0.00001$, 2df). Men were twice as likely as women to seek someone in the young age category (58% versus 23%) whereas women were three times as likely as men to want someone in the older age group (38% versus 11%).

A sub-sample of those mentioning age, 39 percent, referred to the age of their prospective partner relative to the self (see Table 3). In other words, instead of merely stating that they wanted someone who was young (or old) they stated

Table 2 Who is looking for whom? Age and gender differences

Desired age	All		Men		Women	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Someone young	239	44	191	58	48	23
Someone mid-age	182	34	100	31	82	39
Someone old	116	22	36	11	80	38
Total	537	100	327	100	210	100

Table 3 Relative age preferences in buying the desired partner

a) Who do men want?

Desired age	Young		Mid-age		Older	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Young	120	88	46	47	4	9
Mid-age	13	10	47	49	22	47
Older	3	2	4	4	21	45
Total	136	100	97	100	47	101

Note: Not all columns add to 100% due to rounding up

b) Who do women want?

Desired age	Young		Mid-age		Older	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Young	41	77	4	8	0	0
Mid-age	11	21	35	70	8	18
Older	1	2	11	22	37	82
Total	53	100	50	100	45	100

explicitly that they wanted a partner younger, the same age as, or older than, themselves. It should be pointed out here, however, that most individuals wanted partners of a comparable age to themselves with 85 percent (161) of the young age group, 56 percent (82) of the mid-age group and 63 percent (58) of the older age group doing so. But there were some highly significant gender differences here ($p < 0.00001$, 2df). As shown in Table 3, traditional age differences along gender lines were generally maintained, particularly in the young age group where twice as many women as men sought partners older than themselves. These gendered differentials were less pronounced in the mid age group where most women and about half of the men looked for partners of a comparable age to themselves. In the older age group, however, whilst the majority of women continued to seek men of a similar age with just less than a fifth wanting someone younger, in general older men continued to prefer women younger than themselves with about a tenth wanting someone a lot younger.

The Management of Age

In consumer culture, self-identifying as an older advertiser frequently involved various strategies for reducing the impact of chronological age. Before

elaborating on this, here I merely record that 12 percent (106) of advertisers qualified the disclosure of their chronological age with a word or phrase aimed at undercutting its import. Of these, women were more likely to do so than men, with 17 percent of women qualifying their age statements compared with 8 percent of men – providing support for the hypothesis that ageing is more problematic for women. A more unexpected finding was the relatively youthful age (chronologically speaking) at which individuals included these qualifying statements. Although nobody under 29 years of age did so, 5 percent (5) of the 30–34 age group did, 43 percent (45) of the 35–44 age group did, and 53 percent (56) of those aged 45 years and over did so. As might have been expected, there is a highly statistically significant relationship between age and the propensity to qualify one's age statements ($p < 0.00001$, 2df). In short, the older the advertisers are, the more likely they are to do so with this being true for both men and women.

This sub-sample of advertisers constituted the database for the qualitative analysis which aimed to identify the ways in which advertisers 'manage' their age or process of ageing when advertising in a culture that celebrates youth and the youthful body. The cultural denial of age is evident in the number of mass market books, tabloid press and magazine articles offering advice on how to 'combat age' or 'stop the clock' via age-calibrated exercise regimes, anti-ageing creams, special diets and cosmetic surgery – that is, in the range of disciplinary techniques aimed at effacing the appearance of age, at least on the surface (Woodward, 1999). As Featherstone (1991) has pointed out, the closer the body approximates the idealized images of youth, beauty, health and fitness, the higher its exchange value. This devaluation of age and ageing has implications for advertisers when marketing the self, posing a problem of self-recognition (Turner, 1995). There seems to be a lack of relation between the inner, subjective experience of the self and its outer appearance, between interiority and exteriority. As De Beauvoir (1978[1970]) has expressed this, being old is not the same as feeling old. Advertisers therefore need to manage the disjunction between their sense of self and the 'body in the mirror' (Tulle-Winton, 2000).

Self-identifying as an older advertiser often involves 'mitigating work' (Coupland, 2000). The majority of advertisers did this by simply inserting a single, qualifying word next to the disclosure of their chronological age, for example by describing themselves as 'M young 52' or '55 years young' or 'youthful 44'. These advertisers emphasized the essentially youthful nature of the self in general. Other advertisers however, in elaborating upon this, provided an upbeat, more optimistic version of the self. In contrast to dominant models of decline and degeneration, they described themselves in the language of 'positive ageing'. The focus of these advertisements was mainly on the body, typically emphasizing its youthful appearance, vitality and health:

Attractive lady 5ft 7 slim build smart dresser very young 55 GSOH WLTM tall gentleman, slim/medium build, 50–60 for fun friendship and possible romance. (*The Herald*, May 1996)

Fun loving very fit 50+ seeks genuine sincere man 50–60+ with attractive personality and GSOH for friendship. (*The Independent*, March 1996)

Young 60 year old widow, attractive, n/s, loves music, dancing WLTM gentleman with GSOH to have fun times together. (*The Scotsman*, May 1996)

As Featherstone and Hepworth (1995) have pointed out, older people who have managed to preserve their youthful beauty, fitness and energy are usually subject to praise: they become the ‘heroes of ageing’. This group of advertisers then fall into this category, presenting an anti-ageing image in the crucial areas of personal appearance and lifestyle. Displaying a positive orientation to the future, they produced an image of the ageing self as vigorous, lively, as one readily anticipating new beginnings. As expected, however, the majority of advertisers in this group were women. Although the cultural assumptions of consumer society have made a focus on the body a more general, rather than specifically female, concern (Jagger, 2001), there is still pressure on women, even older women, to market themselves in terms of their appearance, to conform to the youthful body ideal. Thus on the one hand, these advertisers can be construed as the ‘heroines of ageing’, in that their age identity is resonant with consumer culture’s commercialized vision of ‘positive age’. On the other hand, and more negatively, such advertisements provide no challenges to conventional ideas of womanhood, no indications of a loosening of the grip of normative femininity, even on older daters. Instead, older women operated with a self-preservationist conception of the body, remained conscious of the need for a convincing bodily performance and continued to seek approval from the male gaze.

By contrast, another strategy adopted by some advertisers was to ‘disembody’ the self by suggesting, for instance, that they had a ‘youthful outlook’, or were ‘young at heart’. In other words, they constructed a split between mind and body with primacy being given to the mind:

Male 56 but young at heart, good humoured with nothing to offer but companionship and affection seeks sincere female 40–45 for friendship and possible relationship. (*The Scotsman*, March 1996)

Creative and artistic thinker, young outlook, thinks she is 30 when she is 60, seeks n/s intelligent gentleman with similar feelings. (*The Scotsman*, May 1996)

The Cartesian dualism was exploited here with emphasis being placed on the mind, confirmed as the seat of the true self (Tulle-Winton, 2000). Germane here is Featherstone and Hepworth’s (1995) notion of age and ageing as a mask that hides the real self. They suggest that social actors preserve a sense of the self as unchanging and timeless by reinterpreting any signs of bodily decay or decline as a mask beneath which the true self lies. Below the mask, the self remains untouched, enduring and forever young.

Bodies are, of course, open to a wide range of interpretations and meanings. Thus rather than interpret any ‘body betrayals’ as a mask, other advertisers deployed them as a badge. That is, they ‘put on age’, adopted an ‘old

persona', in order not to be classified as old. Adopting a witty or playful approach to their age identity, they produced versions of the self that parodied or exaggerated normative notions of ageing:

Balding M 52, but still got own teeth, 6' n/s likes cinema, theatre concerts, travel seeks F for happy times and poss l/term r/ship. (*The Guardian*, May 1996)

M 58 bodily parts still in working order, WLTM lady for fun times, erotic frolics and possible romance. (*The Independent*, May 1996)

Hi, guys, prof F happy to be 50 and not ready for the day trips loves music and dancing seeks M for steamy romance. (*The Guardian*, March 1996)

In these advertisements, we can detect a detached ironic tone that suggests that the 'buyer' is not intended to take the content of the advertisement too seriously. The language of shared knowingness and slightly mocking humour allows advertisers to distance themselves from the oppressions of ageing and what is normatively advocated for older age groups. They indicate a disrespect for the conventions of age, a potential for transgressing the norms of expected social behaviour, an unwillingness to play the age game. Instead, the tone of playfulness and jest construct an ageing self as one who is self reflexive, critical, set apart from the traditional vocabularies of age and their ageist prescriptions. Moreover, these playful self-presentations challenge the 'naturalness' of traditional modes of ageing and render visible their socially constructed nature. To this extent, they may operate as subversive performances in contexts where older people are conventionally disadvantaged. As Coupland (2000) has pointed out, to be, act or look older within the dating game is to be less relationally marketable. Thus to paraphrase Butler (1989), parodies of the regulatory norm can cause 'older trouble'. It could be speculated then that some of these advertisements suggest new possibilities for older daters, a more confident and adventurous approach to ageing which is a far cry from culturally validated images of decrepitude, decline and decay. They may provide some indication of what older subjectivities might be.

Lest we become overly optimistic, however, the starkest illustration of the enduring power of consumer culture's discourse on age and ageing is the relatively young age (chronologically speaking) at which individuals produced their qualifying statements. Advertisers in their thirties were sufficiently 'age conscious' that they felt obliged to qualify their disclosure of age by describing themselves, for instance, as 'youthful 34 yr old male', or 'male 37 but feels much younger' or 'very young 39 year old female'. As Gullette (2003) has pointed out, age ideology, especially of inevitable decline, is now 'clamped over progress in the lifecycle' like a 'kink in the hose' as early as 20 or even 15.

The Way We Were?

First, a cautionary note. Whatever conclusions are drawn from the study about the direction of socio-cultural change and dating practices can only be very

speculative and in need of further ethnographic exploration. The data may provide some clues, however, as to issues requiring further empirical investigation and substantiation. That said, the theoretical questions we can begin tentatively to address here concern changing lifestyles according to age and gender, the extent to which we can see evidence of a shift from modernity to postmodernity and the degree to which we can talk about the existence of 'postmodern selves'.

The analysis suggests that consumer culture has impacted differentially on young men and women. That more young men than young women resort to self-advertising could simply be explained in thoroughly modernist vein in that men traditionally have taken the initiative in romantic and sexual encounters, added to which, consumption is now seen as a legitimate male activity. But the development of bolder subjectivities for girls (McRobbie, 1996) means that such conventions may have been overturned: women are unlikely to passively play a waiting game. Thus the data may intimate a 'crisis in masculinity' wherein young men's possession of cultural and symbolic capital may now be on shaky ground. No longer able to rely on occupation as a source of identity and prestige and knowing that they are likely to be judged on their looks and embodied performances, young men may now lack confidence in the mating game. In this context, dating via self-advertising offers (albeit temporary) respite from embodied encounters and reduces the risk of 'not being fancied' – at least in a public dating market place.

Whilst aspects of consumer culture may operate to the detriment of young men, the conditions of postmodernity have seen a 'revolution in femininity'. In a culture that emphasizes surfaces and appearances, young women are well ahead of the game! Released from a 'bedroom culture' and boosted by their successes in academia, not only are young women more confident, independent and work focused but also, it might be suggested, less inclined to seek an early domestic role. Whereas in modernity women defined the self in terms of marriage and domesticity, what female subjectivity is and how it should be expressed has become a matter of multiple choices. A postmodern, consumer culture appears to offer young women more opportunities than their mothers, opportunities that may allow them to defer self-advertising until a later age than boys.

The freedoms and achievements of younger women, however, do not continue over the lifecycle, with more older women than men seeking partners via self-advertising. As gender connects with age to produce differential access to forms of self-actualization and economic capital, a female forfeit is paid. Whilst 'older women' cannot be treated as a unitary category with individual narratives of the self requiring further ethnographic research, bereavement, divorce, career ambitions and family care, perhaps, may have kept them 'out of the social', especially the dating market place. Since older women also constitute the majority of part-time employees, many are just 'a husband away from poverty' as Ehrenreich (1983) puts it. Deprived of the traditional protections of marriage or merely fed up with living alone, for older women desiring a partner, self-advertising may well be their best option.

Thus we cannot ignore, as postmodern theorists have tended to do, the uneven impact of contemporary culture on individuals. The ability to participate in the reflexive project of the self and negotiate lifestyle decisions from a diversity of options is shaped in complex ways by gender and age. Whilst it might be possible to conceptualize young women as 'postmodern selves' (albeit temporarily!) it is not clear that in a world of embodied performances, young men and older women fare so well.

In the buying mode, the extent to which those gendered differentials associated with modernity were maintained varied according to age group. In the case of mid-age and older men, it is likely that the norms of consumer culture merely reinforce the desirability of having a youthful partner; the greater the age gap, the more she will be seen as a mark of his success, so *plus ça change!* But if mid-age men are choosing younger women on account of their fertility (as Darwinists have implied), on the assumption that all young women 'naturally' want and will produce children, they may be sadly disappointed! Marriage and cohabitation are no longer inevitably linked to parenthood, with fertility rates halving between 1900 and 1997 (EOC, 2000b) and 22.5 percent of professionally qualified women choosing to remain childless (Elliot and Dobson, 2003). In postmodernity, anatomy is no longer destiny: motherhood has become a lifestyle decision, a maternal identity one choice among many – an option some choose to reject.

Against any seductively oversimplified story of postmodern progress, we can point to the persistence of tradition. For those young and mid-age women who do want children, older men, as the main possessors of economic capital, remain attractive. Since women's achievements in the educational sphere have not been accompanied by improvements in the labour market, their cultural capital is not inevitably converted into economic capital. As little or nothing has changed in the last two decades as far as responsibility for childcare and housework are concerned, women who do want a family may still need a 'provider', if only for a short period. Young women's desire for financial independence and absorbing work clashes with their wish for children and motherhood. Celebrities and Hollywood stars apart, motherhood without economic dependence on a man remains for most women merely a pipe dream! Phenomena associated with postmodernity therefore are highly ambivalent, exhibiting both progressive and regressive features. For young women, motherhood constitutes both an opportunity and a risk. Whilst providing some opportunities for personal fulfilment, it invariably curtails and delimits the reflexively mobilized trajectory of the self.

My hypothesis that traditional age differentials would be reversed in the mid or older age group of women – that older, richer, sexually independent women would now prefer younger men or even 'toyboys', was not sustained by the data. A minority of women were prepared to emulate J.K. Rowling and Madonna and indulge their taste for the previously 'forbidden fruit' of younger men, but (disappointingly), no one sought a 'toyboy'. Older girls, it seems, remain a bit reluctant to have fun! That said, these findings do signal a disrupt-

tion to what is normatively advocated for older women, suggesting that they are now freer to acquire the lifestyle, including the partner, of their choice. To a degree therefore they may well suggest a new emergent social trend, a challenge to existing 'rules of the game' (Rose, 1999).

Finally, the surprisingly young age at which advertisers felt compelled to engage in 'mitigating work' when disclosing their chronological age, can be read (without wishing to be overly deterministic) as an index of the 'tyranny of youth' in consumer culture. It is indicative of the way in which even the young are exhorted to be, look and act younger. Although postmodern theorists claim that identity has become 'a free for all', with individuals reinventing themselves at will, it seems that projects of the self often reflect imposed aesthetic codes of youthfulness, rather than expressing any self-determined individuality. Moreover, although ageing is less a specifically female concern, it remains more problematic for women whose 'marketability' continues to depend upon their adherence to certain youthful norms of appearance, body shape and size. Indeed, when it comes to age, a notion of the body as a phenomenon of options and choices pivotal to the reflexive project of the self is highly questionable, with fixity and stability, not reflexivity, as more appropriate ways of conceptualizing the older, embodied female self.

In sum, the data may indicate that we are more firmly wedded to the modernist enterprise than many theorists of the postmodern have allowed. There are few intimations of any fundamental breakdown of identities based on traditional gender roles and age, or that individuals have now been released from their traditional subject positions. Indeed, the data presented here suggest that individuals are negotiating their identities within a range of socially proscribed expectations, centred round a dominant cultural emphasis on remaining young. Whilst there does seem to be a greater propensity for theatrical play, modernist individuality and less 'persona' seem to remain the order of the day. It might be safer to conclude therefore that although a postmodern society may well be a consumer society, a consumer society is not inevitably a postmodern one.

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Notes on Methods

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* – a selection made on the grounds that the findings would apply to, and be representative of, a cross-section of advertisers. As Woll and Young (1989) have pointed out, those using this method of meeting partners are likely to be middle class and readers of these newspapers belong mainly to this social group

(National Readership Survey, 1996). This possible middle-class bias, however, has implications for the generalizability of the findings to the population as a whole, in that any conclusions drawn are only meaningful to this group. The interrelation of gender, age and social class in the dating game therefore warrants further investigation necessitating, perhaps, the inclusion of newspapers with a working-class readership. This is of particular importance for a study concerned with the nature of social change.

Advertisements were sampled over a four-week period, the first two weeks of March and May 1996, thereby controlling in part for any seasonal variations. Repeat advertisements and those for gay and group relationships were eliminated from the sample, producing a total of 1094 ads. Reasons for these exclusions and other problematic issues with the research methods have been discussed elsewhere (Jagger, 1998).

As has been implied, the two dependent variables, gender and age, were central to the research project. Initially, I organized those advertisers mentioning age, 86 percent (940), into age bands of five-yearly intervals. In doing so, I used either the actual age of advertisers, when specified, or the mid-points of any age range given for the self; that is 'mid-40s' was taken as an assumed age of 45 years, 'late 30s' 37.5 years and so on. For the purposes of the analysis of age differences, however, I divided the sample into 3 categories, the young (under 35 years), a mid-age group (35–44 years) and an older age group (45 years and over) which were distilled from the previous age bands. By doing this I was able to distribute the sample into three broadly equal categories which, I considered, would allow for a more meaningful assessment of these age differences. The wisdom of this tripartite division was confirmed when I looked at gender, in that it also broadly reflected the gendered differentiation of the sample. That is, the fact that there were more men than women in the young age group, more men in the mid-age group but more women in the older age group.

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