

Online Dating: Where Technology and Evolution Collide

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When searching for a soul mate, you might think that the more options, the better. But the rise of technology – notably, the Internet – has thrown a wedge in that perception.

The Internet offers us an abundance of options when selecting everything from bicycles to mates that is unprecedented in human history. Although we may think that the extra options are good, new research has shown that we may be more satisfied when choosing from fewer options – and we may not even be cognitively equipped to correct this misconception.

Throughout most of human history, we've had significantly fewer options for choosing a mate, and so we would strongly welcome any additional options when they came along. For instance, when our

neocortex was developing, in part to deal with social networks, the average human group consisted of roughly 150 individuals. Healthy group members of reproductive age of the opposite sex would total about 35 – slim pickings, by the Internet’s standards.

Because we developed in this kind of social environment, we have a tendency to desire ever more options. That’s why, for example, people are enticed by dating Web site Match.com’s offer of “millions of possibilities.” But, as a team of researchers has shown in a recent study, this abundance of options may not make the chooser feel or choose any better than a pool of just a half dozen or so options. Psychologist Alison Lenton from the University of Edinburgh, Barbara Fasolo from the London School of Economics and Political Science, and cognitive scientist Peter Todd from Indiana University have presented their findings on this subject in a recent issue of IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication.

As the researchers explain, people tend to anticipate that they’ll feel better about “shopping for a mate” when there is a large number of options. However, in actuality, people feel equally good when faced with few as opposed to many options. The scientists performed two experiments demonstrating this clash between anticipation and experience.

In their first experiment, the researchers asked 88 participants (with an average age of 22) what they thought was the ideal number of potential mates to choose from, with a range between 1 and 5,000 options. Participants judged each set (very small to very large) of potential mates on four criteria: expected difficulty of making a selection, anticipated satisfaction with their decision, anticipated regret after making their decision, and expected enjoyment of the selection process.

On average, participants predicted that they would be overall most

satisfied when selecting from about 20-50 possible mates. So, in the second experiment, the researchers investigated how satisfied people were when choosing a mate from this range compared with the less favored fewer options. Interestingly, they found that participants who chose from 20 personal profiles had roughly similar experiences compared with participants who had to pick from just four profiles. Also, participants' actual experiences when faced with four options were significantly better than anticipated.

As the researchers summarized, “the expected preference for the larger set-size in terms of more enjoyment and satisfaction and less regret did not materialize.” Instead, there is a significant mismatch between what people think they will feel and what they actually feel, the team concluded.

Misjudgment of an optimal number of options has been observed in several other situations besides choosing a mate. Generally, the greatest disadvantages when having more options include being more frustrated by the complexity of the selection process, sometimes not making a selection at all, and experiencing decreased satisfaction and increased regret after making a selection. (When you're faced with a million possibilities, you have a much smaller chance of picking the “right” one than if you had to pick from just four.)

The study also offers suggestive evidence that people aren't paying very close attention to all of the various information provided in the profiles when they have many profiles to sift through and, thus, they might be missing out on interesting/suitable potential mates in this choice context.

“The information overload result was well known to consumer researchers since the ‘70s,” Fasolo told PhysOrg.com. “But the context was always consumer – a bit artificial and more 'novel' in an evolutionary sense. It was not at all obvious that the same result would

occur in the more naturalistic context of mate choice. True, we are examining a more modern mate choice world – not sequential encounters in the jungle, but simultaneous fast-paced encounters with men zooming from one café table to the next – to which humans are relatively less accustomed (though lekking animals are). So, all in all, I would say that the fact that greater variety backfired even in the context of mate choice was non-obvious.”

Researchers have previously tried to explain our misjudgment of option number in evolutionary terms. At the time our brains were evolving to deal with making decisions, humans rarely had too many options to deal with. Therefore, we’re not adapted to deal with the excessive numbers of choices available today. The Internet, which has no physical space limitations, presents us with a problem that never existed for our ancestors. (As the researchers note, about 1% of the 600,000,000 people who use the Internet visit online dating sites.)

After millions of years of seeking more variety under conditions where variety was relatively limited, it may be very difficult to persuade people that more isn’t always better. For one thing, people may not have a point of comparison where they can experience the benefits of fewer options. Also, recognition of the disadvantages may not come until much later on.

Further, even if we do learn from our experiences, it may not matter much. Research has shown that people’s expectations, rather than previous actual experiences, play a larger role in determining whether they will participate in the same event in the future.

In light of these findings, the researchers suggest that Web designers of online dating sites consider this contrast and try to appease people’s desire for more options while making it easier to narrow down large sets. Currently, some sites do the opposite: when a search results yields fewer than 50 (or more, in some cases) profiles, the site encourages users to

broaden their search criteria. Instead, the researchers encourage developers to keep in mind that they must balance people's desire for more choices with the knowledge that giving people such choices may lead them to evaluate potential mates in a more superficial way.

"I find it interesting (and a bit worrying) that the underestimation of the costs of too much choice which we (and other consumer researchers alike) find plagues not just the daters, but the designers of dating Web sites," Fasolo said. "If we want people to make sensible choices, researchers need to 'nudge' (to say it with Thaler and Sunstein) dating Web site designers towards simpler and more manageable Web sites."

More information: Lenton, Alison P.; Fasolo, Barbara; and Todd, Peter M. "'Shopping' for a Mate: Expected versus Experienced Preferences in Online Mate Choice." IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication, Vol. 51, No. 2, June 2008.

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