UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM
Psychology

FORM 2A- RESEARCH MASTER'S PSYCHOLOGY: THESIS RESEARCH PROPOSAL

1. GENERAL INFORMATION

1.1 Student information

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1.2 Supervisor information

Supervisor name*:	Hannes Rosenbusch
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Note. If either the supervisor or the second assessor is not exam certified, please also fill in the name of the formal supervisor/formal second assessor.

Specialization:	Methods (1st supervisor) & Social Psychology (2nd supervisor)

1.3 Other information

Date:	22nd march
Status:	2nd draft
Number of EC for the thesis:	25

Note. 1EC = 28 hours. Minimally 22EC and maximally 28EC, excluding 4EC for the research master thesis proposal. The total number of EC for the Internship and Thesis should be 50EC.

Ethics Review Board (ERB) code:	FMG-7081

Note. See https://www.lab.uva.nl/lab/ethics/

Have your research proposal signed and approved by your supervisor (see Section 9) and submit the signed research proposal and two peer reviews via CANVAS. Please inform by email your supervisor and the secretariat of the research master psychology (thesis-researchmaster-psy-fmg@uva.nl) that you submitted your research proposal.

A response of the Research Master's Thesis Committee can be anticipated within 10 workdays (i.e., two weeks) after handing in the proposal.

2.   TITLE AND SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

2.1   Match Me if You Can – A Conjoint Analysis of Mate Selection in Heterosexual Online Dating

2.2   Summary of proposal

My thesis aims to investigate the factors influencing mate selection of heterosexual individuals in online dating through conjoint analysis. There is plenty of prior research on this topic, which shares methodological limitations. This study strives to address these limitations of conventional methods while maintaining ecological validity. It combines prior research on mate preferences, including physical attractiveness, intelligence, height, bio and occupation, and their interactions with gender. Additionally, I will explore the role of similarity between individuals (i.e., homophily) in mate selection. The study will use an Online Dating App scenario and manipulate these attributes in profiles presented to participants in an online survey. Participants will make match vs. no match decisions based on profiles, and data will be analyzed using Bayesian multilevel logistic regression. Findings will not only replicate previous research using new methods, but also offer new insights about the relative importance of these attributes.

Word count = 146

3.   PROJECT DESCRIPTION

I will conduct the first online dating conjoint analysis, uncovering which factors affect mate selection of heterosexual individuals in online dating and by how much, while addressing methodological limitations and maintaining ecological validity. I will examine the impact of five attributes, their relative importance, and potential gender interaction. Moreover, I will examine whether homophily affect mate selection.

3.1   Prior research

Online dating has become increasingly popular, with about 45% of relationships starting online (Booth, 2024). One reason for this increased popularity is the availability of detailed

information about the potential partner (e.g., profile picture and description; Finkel et al., 2012).

Based on this information, individuals decide whether they want to match this profile (Mierke et al.,

2011; Tong et al., 2019).

Each of the following four attributes introduces a major predictor of mate selection in

heterosexual dating, both in online and offline settings (Abramova et al., 2016): Physical

attractiveness (Abramova et al., 2016), intelligence (Miller, 2000), height (Hitsch et al., 2010) and

occupation (Abramova et al., 2016) of potential mates. Alongside these attributes, the biography is

an important component of a typical online dating profile and has been found to influence

heterosexual mate selection as well (Fiore et al., 2008). While these five attributes offer valuable

insights, it is important to note that various other factors, such as race (Zhang & Anderson, 2022) or

socio-economic status (Abramova et al., 2016), also play significant roles in mate selection. However,

we had to focus on a smaller subset of attributes. We chose these five attributes based on their

prominence in mate selection literature, ease of manipulation, and likelihood of display in an online

profile.

Physical Attractiveness

While both, men, and women value physical attractiveness in partners (Byrne, 1997;

Woloszyn et al., 2020), men tend to prioritize it more than women (Buss, 1989; Meltzer et al., 2014).

This can be explained by Darwin's sexual selection theory (1871), which suggests that men favor

women with high reproductive capacity, as youth and attractiveness signal female fertility.

Therefore, men place greater importance on physical attractiveness compared to women.

Intelligence

Besides physical attractiveness, intelligence is valued in romantic partners (Evans & Brase,

2007; Li et al., 2002) as it reflects genetic benefits and parenting abilities (Miller, 2000).

Gender differences in mate preferences align with sex selection theory. Unlike men, women seek a partner with reproductive potential, and a commitment to invest in her and their offspring (Geary et al., 2004). Men's reproductive potential is often assessed based on their ability to provide resources for their children. Consequently, women place greater emphasis on qualities like intelligence and socioeconomic status (Buss, 1989; Hitsch et al., 2010).

Height

In online dating, where profiles may lack detailed physical information, height is an important factor. Research indicates that height correlates with positive outcomes, as taller individuals are generally viewed as more favorable (Judge & Cable, 2004). These associations are not due to actual performance superiority, rather, height influences societal markers of status and success (Judge & Cable, 2004).

Gender differences research indicates that women prefer taller partners, while men tend to favor shorter women (Salska et al., 2008). This preference may stem from societal norms that stigmatize women displaying physical indicators of power, such as height or muscularity, which violate traditional gender norms suggesting men as more powerful than women (Salska et al., 2008).

Occupation

Finally, online dating success varies across occupations with gender being a major splitting factor. As mentioned above, according to sexual selection theory, women place greater emphasis on socioeconomic status than men (Buss, 1989; Meltzer et al., 2014).

Biography

In addition to specific attributes, the biography section (i.e., bio) of a profile plays an important role. Within this free-text segment, individuals can present themselves in their own words, writing about their personality traits, favorite interests, and activities, as well as their desired

relationship partner and relationship goals. Research shows that the bio can influence mate selection. For example, individuals who demonstrate originality within their bio are perceived as more intelligent and humorous, consequently enhancing their attractiveness to potential matches and heightening their likelihood of finding a suitable match (Zanden et al., 2022). Moreover, next to profile pictures, the bio has emerged as a key factor when evaluating profile attractiveness (Fiore et al., 2008). Nevertheless, the relative importance of the biography compared to other profile attributes such as profile pictures, height, and occupation remains ambiguous. Given the established correlation between a compelling biography and the likelihood of being selected, I expect the biography to influence mate selection positively.

Homophily

Next to specific attributes, people select each other based on shared attributes, a phenomenon known as homophily (McPherson et al., 2001). This effect also applies to online dating, where similarity leads to attraction (Fiore & Donath, 2005) and is associated with greater relationship satisfaction (Finkel et al., 2012; Luo, 2009). Therefore, I expect similarity to be an additional factor influencing mate selection.

Response Biases and Method effects

Mate selection in online dating has been extensively studied, yet previous methods share inherent limitations. Many studies rely on real profiles, which can convey intended qualities but also unintentionally communicate other information (Donath, 1996). Therefore, conducting controlled experiments to investigate attribute effects is crucial to address this issue.

Furthermore, most studies use overall attraction as their dependent variable, which is an evaluative measure. However, Wiederman and Dubois (1998) observed significant disparities between participants' stated preferences for a mate and their actual choices when evaluating profiles of potential partners. Their findings indicated that self-report measures often align more

closely with gender differences as predicted by evolutionary theory, whereas these differences are less pronounced when individuals make actual decisions. Therefore, a behavioral measure (e.g., match vs. no match) better reflects real choices on online dating platforms.

To overcome these limitations, this research employs conjoint analysis, a widely used multivariate analysis in marketing research (Lohrke et al., 2010). Participants choose between realistic dating profiles, consisting of multiple attributes with varying levels. After each profile, participants decide whether they would match this profile. Unlike traditional approaches that evaluate attributes independently, conjoint analysis requires participants to assess whole individuals with various trait combinations (Mogilski et al., 2019). This study design reveals how individuals prioritize different attributes of a partner by evaluating combinations, rather than isolated traits.

Conjoint analysis reduces bias by bypassing repeated reporting of preferences (Shepherd & Zacharakis, 1997) and measures revealed preferences rather than stated ones by recording how individuals choose from imperfect romantic partners (Wood & Brumbaugh, 2009).

It also enhances ecological validity by mirroring natural mate selection processes, where individuals assess partners with various trait combinations (Mogilski et al., 2019). By pre-specifying combinations of partner traits, researchers can identify the most influential factors in mate selection.

3.2 Key questions

The study's main goal is to examine which factors affect mate selection in online settings. Specifically, it seeks to address the following research questions: What is the influence of physical attractiveness, intelligence, height, biography and occupation on the probability of mate selection in online dating? Does the influence and relative importance of these factors vary between genders? Does the homophily effect mate selection? While previous research has examined these effects

individually, this study integrates them within realistic choice-based scenarios. This leads to my hypotheses:

Replication Hypotheses

Attractiveness hypothesis (H1): There will be a positive association between targets' physical attractiveness and probability of selection (cf., Byrne, 1997; Woloszyn et al., 2020).

Intelligence hypothesis (H2): There will be a positive association between targets' intelligence and probability of selection (cf., Evans & Brase, 2007; Miller, 2000).

Regarding height and occupation, I do not have a hypothesis about whether there is a main effect of height on mate selection probability or the direction of a possible effect. Therefore, I will examine these effects exploratory.

Interaction Hypotheses

Attractiveness-Interaction hypothesis (H1a): The association between targets' physical attractiveness and probability of selection is stronger for male selectors than female selectors (cf., Darwin, 1871; Hitsch et al., 2010).

Intelligence-Interaction hypothesis (H2a): The association between targets' intelligence and probability of selection is stronger for female selectors than male selectors (cf., Buss, 1989; Hitsch et al., 2010).

Height-Interaction hypothesis (H3): The association between targets' height and probability of selection is negative for male selectors and positive for female selectors (cf., Abramova et al., 2016; Salska et al., 2008).

Occupation-Interaction hypothesis (H4): The association between targets' occupation and probability of selection is stronger for female selectors than male selectors (cf., Darwin, 1871; Hitsch et al., 2010).

Biography & Similarity Hypothesis

Biography hypothesis (H5): There will be a positive association between targets' biography and targets' probability of selection (cf., Fiore et al., 2008; Zanden et al., 2022).

Homophily hypothesis (H6)*:* The more similar targets' scores are to selectors scores, the higher is the

probability of selection (cf., Finkel et al., 2012; Luo, 2009).

Ranking Hypotheses

Because previous conjoint analysis on mate selection in online dating is lacking, I formulated

evidence-based hypotheses about the ranking order (See Table 1).

Table 1

Rank	Both (Full Sample)	Women (Sub-Sample)	Men (Sub-Sample)
1	Physical Attractiveness	Physical Attractiveness	Physical Attractiveness
2	Intelligence	Occupation	Intelligence
3	Occupation	Intelligence	Height (-)
4	Height	Height	Occupation

Hypothesized rank order.

A meta-analysis (Eastwick et al., 2014) revealed that physical attractiveness is the strongest

predictor of romantic evaluation. This is supported by an online dating study, which show that across

four studies physical attractiveness is the largest predictor of mate selection (Chopik & Johnson,

2021). Moreover, Furnham (2009) showed in his study, which is based on self-reports, that for men

and women intelligence is the second most important factor from these five attributes. Moreover,

this study found that occupation is less important than intelligence for women but has no

importance for men. Despite this, occupation has been identified to be important for women, but

has no or low impact for men (e.g., Hitsch et al., 2010; Abramova et al., 2016). Hence, I anticipate it

to be the second most important predictor for women and the least important for men. The least

important factor for women and men (except for occupation) is height (Furnham, 2009).

Even though, research shows that the biography is less important than the profile picture

(Fiore et al., 2008), it is still not clear how it performs compared to the other attributes. Therefore, I

do not have an expectation about a ranking position for biography and will investigate its relative importance exploratory.

Thus, my hypotheses are:

Ranking hypothesis (H7): The expected ranking is: Physical Attractiveness (1st), intelligence (2nd) occupation (3rd), height (4th).

Ranking Women hypothesis (H8): For women the expected ranking is: Physical attractiveness (1st), occupation (2nd), intelligence (3rd), height (4th).

Ranking Men hypothesis (H9): For men the expected ranking is: Physical attractiveness (1st), intelligence (2nd), height (3rd), occupation (4th).

Word count = 1741

4. PROCEDURE

4.1 Operationalization

Design

To examine my research question, I manipulate five independent variables, which are the characteristics of a dating profile (physical attractiveness, intelligence, occupation, biography, and height). Each of the attributes varies on a continuous scale.

Physical Attractiveness

I will display physical attractiveness via the profile pictures. These pictures will be AI generated and morphed in attractiveness according to the methods outlined by Feng and Lei (2022). The pictures will be pre-tested based on physical attractiveness.

Height

I will use a uniform random sample from the range of 158cm to 174cm for women and 170cm to 189cm for men. This is based on the 10th and 90th percentile for men and women in Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2017).

Intelligence

To display intelligence, we will use a uniform random sample from IQ scores ranking from 80 to 120. This is based on the 10th and 90th percentile in Germany (Tuto, 2014).

Occupation

I will pre-test multiple occupations based on their attractiveness in an online dating setting and use the ones with low to high ratings. Specifically, participants will be asked: "On an online dating profile, how attractive would you find someone with this occupation?". Moreover, to account for possible gender differences in ratings, women and men will be asked about the attractiveness of the occupation of the opposite gender (e.g., women will be asked about the attractiveness of occupations that are displayed in a male profile).

Biography

Similar to occupation, we will pre-test a list of different short biographies based on how attractive these are in online dating contexts ("On an online dating profile, how attractive would you find someone with this biography?"). Moreover, to account for possible gender differences in ratings, women and men will be asked about the attractiveness of the biography of the opposite gender.

Homophily

To measure similarity in physical attractiveness, and intelligence, I will ask participants to rate themselves on each attribute with the question "*How do you think your score would be regarding [attribute]?*". Moreover, I will ask them about their height and occupation and use this information to assign them scores on these attributes. I will compare their scores with their indicated preferences.

Match vs. No Match Decision

The dependent variable is the binary match vs no match decision. The participants must decide whether they would want to match the profile or not.

Procedure

I will conduct my study using the market research platform Appinio (Appinio, 2024). Female participants will engage in the male profile survey, while male participants will participate in the female profile survey. Both surveys follow the same procedure. Participants will receive a background story explaining that we want to test which attributes should be included in a dating app profile. Next, participants will rate themselves on various variables and provide information about their height and occupation. They will then view the first profile and decide whether they would match with it or not. Each profile will include a set of five attributes, with scores randomly assigned to each attribute. Each participant will view 12 profiles featuring different score combinations of the five attributes. Finally, I will ask participants about their demographics, sexual preference, relationship status and whether they use dating apps. The survey will conclude with an attention check.
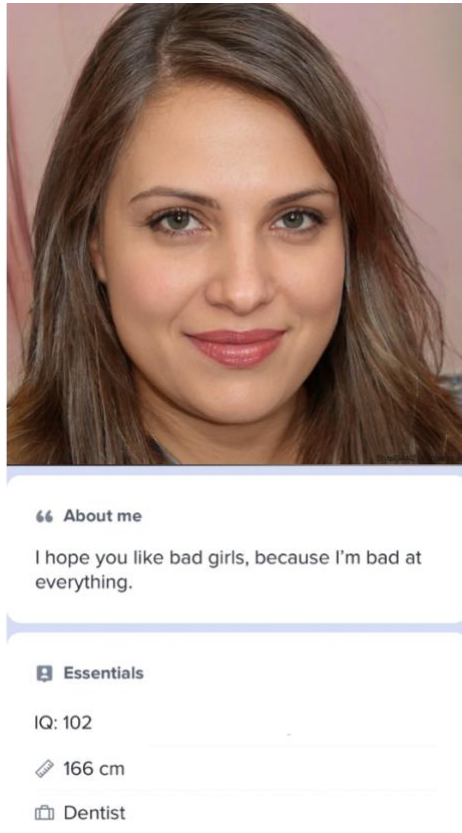
4.2 Sample characteristics

There are many different effects that are going to be tested. According to the literature, these effects are varying from large to small (e.g., Judge & Cable, 2004; Furnham, 2009). Moreover, I expect interaction effects, which need more participants than main effects to be sufficiently powered. Since I have a complex multilevel logistic regression, there is too much uncertainty about the variables that needed to be guessed for a power analysis. Thus, to not base my data collection on too much guesswork, it is most reasonable to rather maximize the resources I can spent on sample size, which is going to be around 600 participants. Moreover, I am using Bayesian statistics to analyze my data. The advantage of this is that these analyses are independent of the sample size.

Participants will be recruited through Appinio's online platform. The sample will include exclusively heterosexual individuals aged 18 to 35 in Germany to ensure feasibility within the study's timeframe. Those who fail the attention check will be excluded. Participants will receive Appinio credits as a reward.

4.3 Materials

I will generate stimuli including the five attributes (See Figure 1 for an example). I will use AI generated profile pictures and a morph website to generate profiles that are less and more attractive.

Figure 1

66 About me

I hope you like bad girls, because I'm bad at everything.

Essentials

IQ: 102

166 cm

Dentist

4.4   Data analysis

To test my replication hypotheses (H1 &H2), my gender-interaction hypotheses (H1a-H2a, H3, H4) and the biography hypothesis (H5) I will use a Bayesian multilevel logistic regression (both for the full sample and the sub-samples) with a BIC prior and a beta binomial model prior with a = 1 and b = 1. I will look at the significance of the fixed effects in a multilevel model and control for the nesting within raters and targets. If my expected interactions will be significant, I will look at the simple effects to determine the direction of effects. To assess the relationship between conjoint importance rankings and self-report ratings (the homophily hypothesis H6), I will conduct a Bayesian Pearson correlation. From the previous multilevel logistic regression, I will compare the sizes of the beta coefficients to test the ranking hypotheses (H7-H9).

Word count = 883

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5.   INTENDED RESULTS

If the data support my replication hypotheses (H1 & H2) and gender-specific hypotheses (H1a, H2a, H3 & H4), it will validate previous findings, demonstrating the significant impact of these attributes on heterosexual mate selection. Employing methods designed to mitigate past methodological flaws enhances the robustness of my conclusions.

Should the data support the null hypotheses for any attributes, it suggests evidence for absence of their effect on the probability of selection. This absence may imply that previous research findings regarding (gender-specific) effects were influenced by methodological limitations (cf., Wiederman & Dubois, 1998). Furthermore, it is possible that certain (gender-specific) effects may only manifest offline or under specific methodological conditions. In such cases, further investigation is necessary to explore contextual factors (i.e., possible moderating variables) under which these main and gender effects occur.

In the event that neither the alternative hypotheses nor the null hypothesis receive support, it indicates an absence of evidence, and no conclusion can be made. Additional research is therefore necessary to identify potential effects that may influence the relationship between these attributes and the probability of selection.

If the data support my bio hypothesis (H5), it underscores the significance of the free-text section in a dating app. Consequently, users should invest time in crafting compelling biographies. However, further research is needed to discern what constitutes an effective biography. Conversely, if the null hypothesis is supported, it suggests that the biography may not significantly impact a dating profile and the probability of being selected. Consequently, the content of a bio is less important. Once again, if neither the alternative hypotheses nor the null hypothesis are supported, further research is needed.

Similarly, if the data aligns with my homophily hypothesis (H6), it strengthens existing research findings. Conversely, support for the null hypothesis may suggest that in more realistic online dating scenarios, similarity might not hold as much importance as other attributes. Moreover, the absence of evidence for both the alternative and null hypotheses underscores the need for additional research.

Regardless of whether the data confirm my ranking hypotheses (H7–H9) or reveal alternative patterns, it will provide insights into the relative importance of the attributes under investigation. These insights are valuable not only for dating apps seeking to enhance their matching algorithms but also for users, enabling them to optimize their profiles on online dating platforms. Furthermore, my study informs platform providers in making decisions regarding gender-specific add-on features.

Finally, my research supports recent findings demonstrating that conjoint analysis is an effective method not only in market research, but also for measuring the importance of attributes in individuals.

Word count = 429

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6. WORK PLAN – max 500 words
6.1 Time schedule

I want to receive 25EC for this thesis (+ 4EC for the research proposal). Translated in working hours this means around 700 hours (+ 112) in total. Divided into 25 weeks, I would work around 32,5 hours per week.

- Week 1 – Week 5 (09.01 – 11.02): Generating a research idea, formalizing the research

    question, writing the research proposal, preparing study.

- Week 6 – Week 8 (12.02 – 29.02): Finalizing research proposal.

- Week 8 – Week 12 (01.03 – 31.03): Programming study, research proposal review + Method

    course.

- Week 12 – Week 14 (01.04 – 21.04): Programming study + finalizing study.

- Week 15 (22.04-28.04): Data collection. Since we will collect data online and we do not have a very specific sample, it is most likely that the data collection will be done withing 1-2 days. However, I want to plan a bit more time in case something does not go as planned.

- Week 16 (29.04 – 05.05): Week off.

- Week 17 – Week 21 (08.05 – 02.06): Data analysis, writing final report + Method course.

- Week 22 – Week 25 (03.06 – 30.06): Finalizing final report.

6.2 Infrastructure

I will conduct the study online, using the panel from Appinio.

6.3 Data storage

This project will follow the storage protocol of the Psychology Research Institute. Appinio might use the data for marketing purpose.

6.4 Budget

We plan to collaborate with the German survey platform Appinio. We will use their platform for data collection. As part of this collaboration, they are granted permission to utilize our data for marketing purpose.

Word count = 246

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7. REFERENCES

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8.   FURTHER STEPS

Make sure your supervisor submits an Ethics Checklist for your intended research to the Ethics Review Board of the Department of Psychology at https://www.lab.uva.nl/lab/ethics/

9.   SIGNATURES

☒ I hereby declare that both this proposal, and its resulting thesis, will only contain original material and is free of plagiarism (cf. Teaching and Examination Regulation in the research master's course catalogue).

☒ I hereby declare that the result section of the thesis will consist of two subsections, one entitled "confirmatory analyses" and one entitled "exploratory analyses" (one of the two subsections may be empty):

    a) The confirmatory analysis section reports *exactly* the analyses proposed in Section 4 of this proposal

    b) The exploratory analysis section contains not previously specified, and thus exploratory, analyses.

Location: **Student's signature:**   **Supervisor's signature:**

Amsterdam