

Vincent Harris
The University of Texas
Department of Communication Studies
Dr. Anita Vangelisti
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(Swiping) Left and Right: Visual Political Cues and Political Polarization

INTRODUCTION

Online dating has become one of the most popular ways to meet and select relationship partners. As its user base has grown, online dating platforms have fragmented into an array of websites marketed to niche populations. Reflecting changes in online behavior, Internet dating has evolved into an almost uniquely visual enterprise. The most downloaded dating applications emphasize images as the catalyst for initiating conversations between potential dating partners. Applications, such as Tinder, offer users the ability to swipe their screens left in rejection or right in lust of potential suitors. This decision is often made in a matter of seconds and is based completely upon visual stimuli.

Parallel to the rapid rise in online dating has been a growing existence of political polarization in America. Whether for reasons of niche news, selective exposure, inflamed rhetoric from elites, or assortment of political preference in dating, polarization is occurring. Assortment based on political preference is a variable that increasingly has scholars worried for the future of political civility in America. Increased polarization is inevitable since mate selection is based on similarity and subsequent time spent together strengthens a couple's shared political views.

But does someone's partisan affiliation affect his or her search for a romantic date? This paper seeks insight into what today's polarized Americans find attractive when it comes to online dating. After beginning with a thorough review of relevant literature, the second section will discuss the fielding of an online survey using Qualtrics. Lastly, the findings will be explained in further detail with an eye towards potential future research and conclusions on partisan polarization in today's modern dating environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The first major online dating website, Match.com, launched in 1995. Since then, online dating has become widely accepted by the public, and is currently the second most common way to meet a significant other (Bustle). A recent PEW study found that one in five adults ages 25-34 have used an online dating site. As the Internet had advanced from web pages into downloadable mobile applications, market forces have encouraged online dating to do the same. Modern online dating platforms such as Tinder (which launched in 2013) and Bumble (which launched in 2014) are different than older dating websites as they are almost completely centered on the use of pictures as the main determiner of garnering a potential date. Users of these platforms select potential mates based mostly on visual cues, style, and attractiveness. With over fifty million people estimated to have downloaded the dating application Tinder (CNBC 2015), the shift towards interactive, easy, and visual-based online dating has become a central aspect of America's dating scene.

Scholars have built a foundation of research concerning the important role that visual attractiveness has on choosing a prospective dating partner. Physical attractiveness has been found to be the single most important determining variable in mate selection (Walster et. al 1966, Lou and Zhang 2009). There is also significant evidence that men value attractiveness as a more important determining factor in dating selection than women (Sprecher 1989, Fales et. al 2015).

Recently, cognitive psychology and neuroscience have also begun asking similar questions relating the importance of attractiveness in mate selection. One recent study using brain imaging technology discovered that increased neurological activity after seeing an image was a predictor of wanting to date a potential mate (Cooper et. al, 2012). Another study concluded that initial visual impressions can help people draw accurate personality conclusions about someone (Olivola and Todorov 2010).

The visual nature of today's dating environment has brought further study to Similarity/Attraction Theory. This theory establishes that dating selection is centered on romantic partners seeking out those who share similar interests and are a reflection of themselves. Assortative mating is a complimentary theory that is supported by evolutionary biology and the animal kingdom. It postulates sexual selection will occur more frequently among those with similar genotypes/phenotypes.

Supporting these theories, research has proven that people are more likely to seek a partner who has a similar education and ethnicity background

(Hitsch 2009, Fiora and Donath 2005). Online dating has streamlined and institutionalized the Similarity/Attraction Theory, having made it as easy as checking a box to find a partner who shares similar interests and ideology.

Despite the previously mentioned theories, the website Match.com performed a large-sample survey and discovered that only a small percentage, 17% of men and 20% of women, said they preferred to date someone from within their own political party. A recent study found support for political homophily in relationships, with both men and women choosing to seek out partners who share similar levels of political engagement as well as similar political interests (Huber and Malhotra 2013). This same study found that ratings of perceived physical attractiveness increased if there were expressly shared political preferences. Knowledge of shared political preferences does, in fact, make people look more attractive.

In *The Dating Preferences of Liberals and Conservatives*, scholars were given access to a popular dating website and found evidence of positive assortation behavior along partisan lines (Klofsted et. al 2012). Despite people being open to dating across partisan lines, their preference is to begin a romantic relationship with someone of similar ideology (Kofoed 2015). Political beliefs are also among the strongest shared traits of long-term relationships (Alford et. al, 2011). Longitudinal studies have shown evidence that as time together increases, the more similar a couple's political beliefs become (Jennings 2001).

Online dating polarization is likely a reflection of a growing partisan divide in the electorate. Republicans and Democrats have grown less trusting and

accepting of those with opposite ideological beliefs (Iyengar 2015). While most people who use online dating websites do not advertise their political beliefs (Klofsted et. al, 2011), potential suitors could glean insight into a person's ideological beliefs from visual cues found in their pictures.

There is a rich body of research showing support for Similarity/Attraction Theory across different variables such as education, height, and even political preference. But as online dating has advanced into today's hyper-visual world, where applications like Tinder and Bumble reign, there has been very little research as to the effect that visual political cues can have on dating judgments. This paper looks to build upon Similarity/Attraction Theory and answer questions about how personal partisan preference effects date selection in an online dating scene controlled by visual aids.

METHODOLOGY

Pre-Test

A pre-test was performed using purchased images of ten women from a stock photography website. The purpose of the pre-test was an effort to control for attractiveness of the women during the study. The women selected for the pre-test were all similar in clothing style and age. Using Google Forms, an online form builder tool, a survey was set up which showed ten images of the women above ten-point Likert scales. Forty men were recruited through email and social media to participate in the pre-test. The men were asked "How attractive do you find this woman?" A one on the low-end of the scale was defined as "not at all"

and a ten on the high end of the scale was defined as “extremely attractive.” Based on the findings, images of four women who were clustered close to an average score of seven on the attractiveness scale were chosen for the main study.

Study Mechanism

The survey was performed through usage of Qualtrics, an online survey research tool provided by the University of Texas. Qualtrics was used because of its ability to incorporate the Internal Review Board’s consent form to participants. Additionally, Qualtrics provides the researcher an easy to use interactive platform from which quick analysis and basic statistical inferences can be analyzed. Unlike survey tools such as Google Consumer Surveys, Qualtrics allows for survey data to be easily exported in multiple file formats for statistical manipulation.

Subject Population

The survey ran April 23, 2016 to April 28, 2016. It continued to run until 200 participants completed the last question. Because participants could skip ahead to later questions, there were inconsistent sample sizes for every question. While there was no maximum age limit on the male subjects, 86% of participants self-identified as between the ages of 18 and 35.

Stimulus Materials. Four photographs of women from the pre-test were used as stimuli and accompanied with related text questions. The photographs were taken from stock photography websites and enhanced with visual political cues using Adobe Photoshop. The enhancements were an arm tattoo of a

Christian cross, an arm tattoo of the words “proud feminist,” and a shirt with imagery of guns accompanied by the words “good girls carry guns.” One of the four women was chosen as random as a control and did not wear a political cue. All four women were of similar age appearance: light skinned, young, and all were wearing a white shirt and jeans. The aforementioned visual political cues were chosen because of their potential authenticity to appear on a dating platform, as well as their disassociation with a particular political candidate. While the Republican Party has an association of support for the Second Amendment, the issue is not one that would identify singularly with the Republican Party to the preclusion of Democrat voters. The words “proud feminist” are possibly associated more with gender identity than a specific party.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from social media accounts of the researcher and a small budget was spent on promoting the study to men across the country in order to boost participation. Subjects were recruited with the promise of a drawing for a \$150 Amazon Gift Card. The winner of the card will be drawn from a list of those who submitted their email address. The study was also posted on the personal LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook profiles of the researcher and his friends.

After seeing an advertisement or post on social media, participants were taken to a unique website link which was branded with the logo of The University of Texas. Because of the nature of the survey as it relates to the issue of online dating of potential female suitors, it was important to use screener questions at

the beginning of the survey. Participants were asked to screen themselves to ensure they were at least eighteen years old, male, heterosexual, and unmarried before they could answer the first topical question. The survey consisted of fifteen questions. The survey included the consent form, six demographic and seven political questions, and an e-mail collection for the Amazon Gift Card drawing.

Figure One, as seen below, is the first non-demographic question asked to survey participants.

In order to not bias participants about the political theme of the study, the survey was publicly disclosed to them with the title “Attractiveness and Online Dating.” None of the questions about political ideology were asked until after the participants had completed the pertinent topical questions.

FIGURE ONE, Cue: Cross Tattoo
Question 6, Woman 1



FIGURE TWO, Cue: Proud Feminist Tattoo
Question 7, Woman 2



On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all, and 10 being absolutely, how likely would you be to ask this woman on a date if you were only making the decision based on this picture?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Absolutely

Likelihood to ask on a date



FIGURE THREE, Cue: None. (CONTROL)
Question 8, Woman 3



On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all, and 10 being absolutely, how likely would you be to ask this woman on a date if you were only making the decision based on this picture?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Absolutely

Likelihood to ask on a date



FIGURE FOUR, Cue: “Good Girls Carry Guns” Sleeveless Shirt
Question 9, Woman 4



On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all, and 10 being absolutely, how likely would you be to ask this woman on a date if you were only making the decision based on this picture?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Absolutely

Likelihood to ask on a date



After completing the series of Likert scale questions as seen in Figures 1 through 4, participants were asked to choose “yes” or “no” to this question: “Scenario: A woman messages you on an online dating application. Her picture shows her wearing a shirt in support of Donald Trump. Would this affect if you responded to her?” Then they were asked, “Scenario: A woman messages you on an online dating application. Her picture shows her wearing a shirt in support of Bernie Sanders. Would this affect if you responded to her?” Finally, participants finished the survey by giving their age range, partisan affiliation, and

their email address if they wished to enter the Amazon drawing. Upon finishing the survey they were redirected to a page thanking them for their participation.

Results

Upon analyzing the results, this paper seeks to address several questions. First, does the partisan affiliation of the participants have an effect on their likelihood to ask the women in the images on a date? The results suggest it does have an effect.

Although 224 men completed the last demographic question of the survey, many of those did not answer one or more questions throughout the survey. Since participants could opt-out of any question, there were varying sample sizes for most questions. 224 people answered question thirteen concerning party identification, with 179 identifying as Republican and 42 identifying as a Democrat. This discrepancy was most likely because the researcher's social media associations tend to be mostly Republican.

Instead of weighing down the answers from the 179 Republicans, 42 Republicans were randomly selected to be compared against the 42 self-identified Democrats. This new subsample of 84 men was used for the following analysis concerning questions of Women 1 through 4. Table 1 (below) shows the average likelihood of men to request a date in the subsample as ordered by image. The averages are calculated from responses on the 10-point Likert scale that appeared beneath each of the four woman's images.

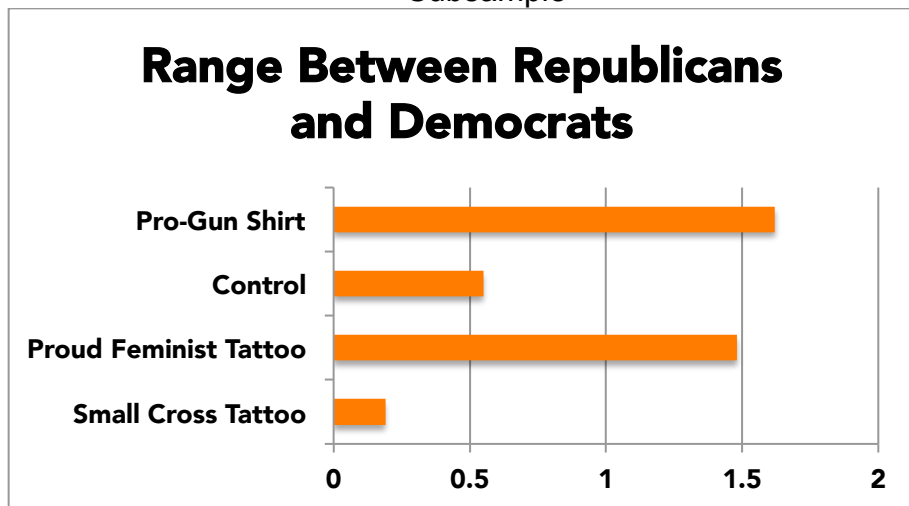
Table 1
 Mean Likelihood to Ask on a Date from Questions 6-9

	Woman 1	Woman 2	Woman 3	Woman 4
Republican Mean	6.24	5.15*	5.3	6.45*
Democrat Mean	6.43	6.63*	5.85	4.83*

*indicates statistical significance

T-tests were performed at a 95% confidence interval comparing the Republican and Democrat samples for each of the four images. Differences between the averages for Woman 1 and Woman 3 were found not to be statistically significant. Differences for Woman 2 and Woman 4 were found to be statistically significant. Woman 2 who wore the tattoo of “Proud Feminist” was more likely to be asked by a Democrat on a date than by a Republican. Subsequently, Woman 2 also earned the highest “likelihood to date” score with Democrats among all four tested images. Her favorability among Democrats was the highest average for either party.

CHART 1
 “Likelihood” to Date Range Between Republicans and Democrats in the Subsample



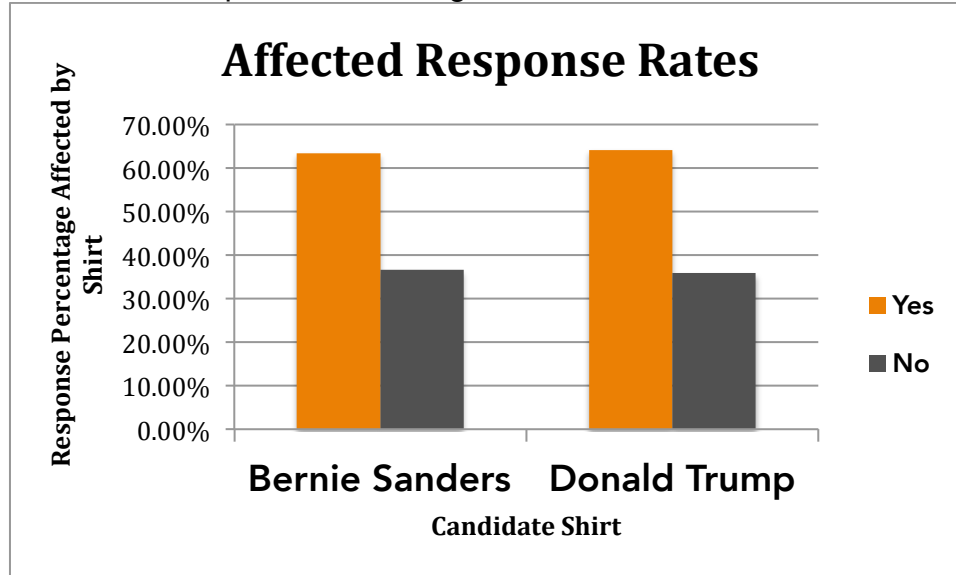
The image of Woman 4, who wore the pro-gun shirt, saw the widest range of dating likelihood between partisans in the subsample. Democrats scored that image the lowest of any tested of either party. Republicans rated her the highest image of any image tested among Republicans.

The second question addressed by the study is whether visual cues associated directly with candidates for office have an effect during the initial phase of online dating. The results suggest that there is an effect.

Questions 10 and 11 asked participants if their response would be affected if a woman who messaged them through a dating application is wearing a shirt in support of Donald Trump or Bernie Sanders. The results showed similar rates of affectedness for either a Donald Trump shirt (63.5% from an *n* of 222) or a Bernie Sanders shirt (64.25% from an *n* of 221).

Within the subsample of 84 men, Democrats were slightly more accepting than Republicans of women wearing either supportive candidate's shirt. Both parties were slightly more affected by the women wearing shirts of their own candidates. Republicans were more affected by the Donald Trump shirt, and Democrats by the wearing of the Bernie Sanders shirt.

CHART 2
Response Percentage from Questions 10 and 11



Finally, this study aims to give insight into whether partisan affiliation has an effect on existing relationships. Question 12 asked, “If you learned a woman you wanted to date was of the opposite political party from yours, would that affect your willingness to date her?” Of the entire sample, 35.6% (*n* of 222) answered yes and 64.4% answered no. Within the subsample of 84, Republicans were slightly more favored to choose “no” as a qualifier than the Democrats.

Additional Discussion & Limitations

As the survey results show, online dating is significantly impacted by America’s growing partisan polarization. The images containing the “proud feminist” tattoo and pro-gun shirt led to dramatically bifurcated responses from within the subsample. Not only were Republicans more likely to want to date the image of gun-supporting Woman 4, but also Democrats were significantly less likely to date her.

Using the number 5 on the 10-point Likert scale as a neutral middle point, Democrat men were more unlikely to date Woman 4 (pro-gun shirt) than were likely. She was the only woman of the four who received a score more negative than positive among a set of the subsample. Considering all four women had been rated as attractive in pre-tests and participating men were asked to make a determination for dating on the shown image alone, the political cue must have elicited a negative enough feeling to have swayed the Democrat men against her as a suitable date. Two sets of men made very different decisions on the likelihood to date similarly attractive women because of the relationship of their partisan affiliations and reactions to the expressed political cues.

It should be noted that there is a difference between a woman holding a political belief and her donning a political cue in a show of support. Many people hold views, even strong views, but do not outwardly express those views to the public. The images tested in this study offered the views of supporting feminism and guns in a blatant way. These women proudly expressed their support for their ideology through their chosen style, leading to results that correlated with party identification.

Considering the low opportunity costs to the participants (they were only asked about a single date), the variance between the two partisan subgroups was larger than expected. The smallest range discrepancies between the partisan subgroups were the control image (Woman 3), and Woman 1 who wore a small cross tattoo. This finding put further importance on the partisan nature of the results from the survey.

Although one could expect Woman 1 (with the cross tattoo) to be rebuked by Democrat males, the tattoo itself could have mitigated any negative effect on partisan differences. Tattoos are linked in society with more liberal and risky-behaviors (Deschesness et. al 2006, Laumann 2006), items that traditional conservatives might not appreciate. Additionally, the sample of Democrats who participated in the study could have been more unrepresentatively religious than a broader sample of Democrats. Future research could test more controversial Bible verses like John 16:18 “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” or visuals of altered or parodied Christian imagery.

Initial analysis of Question 12 was paradoxical when trying to rectify the 64% of men who responded dispassionately about political importance on their dating preferences. However earlier in the survey, similar percentages of men answered that they would be affected if a woman wore a supportive candidate shirt in her online image. These results seem contradictory on their face, but might be explained related to a description of timing within a dating relationship.

Earlier questions in the survey asked participants to make decisions on a first date with no additional information except for the political cues displayed. Forcing the participants to decide seemed reasonable because modern online dating applications operate on a schema where users are asked to make snap decisions about potential dates using only visual images. The importance placed on images is in spite of numerous studies showing the prevalence of altered images by potential partners (Hancock and Toma 2010). It is on the singular

variable of perceived attractiveness, one that is often fabricated, that many online relationships are created.

With knowledge that visual political cues are of significant importance when making dating decisions, it would be pertinent to test different political cues. While only a few political cues were tested in this study, there are countless others which could greatly impact online dating judgments. For example, is a woman who wears a shirt for a country music band judged negatively by liberal men? Alternatively, do conservative men perceive a woman who dyes her hair in bright colors to be liberal?

In order to generate as many complete surveys as possible, the number of questions asked was limited. This in turn led to a lack of follow up questions that could have generated further valuable insight into the results. For example, questions 10 and 11 offered insight about the participants affected by a woman wearing a candidate's shirt. The results of these questions displayed evidence of a response affect but did not offer associated positive or negative connotation.

The greatest limitation of this study is that the findings concern only men. As previously discussed in the literature review, men tend to put more emphasis than women on visual attractiveness during the dating process. It is unknown if partisan women would have been affected similarly in their likelihood to date men who were wearing overtly political cues. Although men traditionally have been the first to court in a relationship, new dating applications like Bumble put women in control of the dating initiation process. Bumble and changing societal norms may

eventually balance the differences between the genders concerning the importance of attractiveness as a dating variable.

Conclusion

With online dating having become a widely accepted relationship initiator, it is important for researchers to continue study into changing patterns of digital dating behavior. While some online dating sites offer users the ability to sort by hobbies and interests, new dating applications have placed heightened emphasis on images as the sole determiner of conversation initiation. These images often offer only limited opportunity to convey personality traits and personally held beliefs to potential suitors. The significance of these images might eventually lead to them becoming important representations of personality characteristics and ideological preferences.

As this study showed, despite the four images of women having been pre-tested as similarly attractive, when partisan political cues were added to their images, partisanship affected the participant's opinions of them. The women became unlikely to be asked on a date by men of their opposite political persuasions when they expressed their political beliefs through style. When compared with a similarly attractive control image, the women wearing partisan cues were more likely to be asked on a date by those whose political affiliations matched their associated cues.

Visuals such as hair color; skin color, and style can be used as inferences in snap judgment decisions about whether to begin a conversation with a digital

suitor. Perhaps wearing a political cue, or having a style reflective of a partisan nature could serve as a blessing to those wishing to signal to those with similar interests what their inward views are. In a culture that has built dating mechanisms which reward visual style over personality substance, blatantly worn political cues could be a helpful way to quickly sort through online dating profiles. As seen in this study, if an interested single person wished to attract a partner with similar political views, they may benefit by expressing themselves in an overtly political way.

This research serves as supporting evidence for the Similarity-Attraction Hypothesis and against the adage “opposites attract.” With the country’s focus this year on the looming Presidential election, partisan preferences might have a larger impact on dating selection than ever before. After all, online dating makes it just as easy as swiping right...or, left....depending on your political affiliation!

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