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Gayle Kaufman

VoonChin Phua  
*Gettysburg College*

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# Is Ageism Alive in Date Selection Among Men? Age Requests Among Gay and Straight Men in Internet Personal Ads

## **Abstract**

We examine 2,400 personal ads from male advertisers collected from the Internet, focusing on age preference by race and sexual orientation. We look at whether advertisers display any age preference in personal ads and whether the preference varies by race and sexual orientation. We find that gay men are more likely than straight men to state an age preference. Also, the preference for younger partners intensified among the older advertisers regardless of race and sexual orientation. Youth is still a treasured commodity in date selection for men. However, some men, especially gay men, prefer more mature partners. At least 20 percent of gay Asian men in all three age groups prefer older partners. Further research is recommended to explore this exception among gay Asian men.

## **Keywords**

personal ads, dating, age preference, sexual orientation

## **Disciplines**

Gender and Sexuality | Social and Behavioral Sciences | Sociology

# Is Ageism Alive in Date Selection among Men? Age Requests among Gay and Straight Men in Internet Personal Ads

GAYLE KAUFMAN  
Davidson College

VOON CHIN PHUA  
CUNY Graduate School and University Center

We examine 2,400 personal ads from male advertisers collected from the Internet, focusing on age preference by race and sexual orientation. We look at whether advertisers display any age preference in personal ads and whether the preference varies by race and sexual orientation. We find that gay men are more likely than straight men to state an age preference. Also, the preference for younger partners intensifies among older advertisers regardless of race and sexual orientation. Youth is still a treasured commodity in date selection for men. However, some men, especially gay men, prefer more mature partners. At least 20 percent of gay Asian men in all three age groups prefer older partners. Further research is recommended to explore this exception among gay Asian men.

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Studies on date selection have shown that people usually have a preference for their prospective dates to be in a certain age group (e.g., Adam 2000). People often use age as a proxy for life stage, attractiveness, maturity, and other characteristics. Age preferences are often dependent on one's own age. Adam (2000) points out that age preferences may be "fixed" or "moving." When one's age preference is fixed, this suggests a form of fixation even as the person ages. For example, a man in his twenties may have a preference for a partner around his age; as he reaches his fifties, he still prefers partners in their twenties. On the other hand, having "moving criteria,"

Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Gayle Kaufman, Department of Sociology, Davidson College, Davidson, NC 28035. Electronic mail: [gakaufman@davidson.edu](mailto:gakaufman@ davidson.edu).

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according to Adam (2000), implies a preference for an age group relative to one's own age. Using the same example, the man who is in his twenties would prefer partners in their twenties; when the same person moves into his fifties, he would then prefer partners also in their fifties. Further, "moving criteria" can also refer to those whose age preference shifts in the opposite direction as they age. For example, although a man in his twenties might prefer someone slightly older as a partner, he may prefer someone younger when he is older.

Some men may have an age preference that is absolute, while others may evaluate potential partners based on "the whole package," in order to decide whether some less desirable traits could be offset by other preferable characteristics. Nonetheless, some studies report that many men prefer younger partners (e.g., Adam 2000), suggesting that ageism is alive in date selection among men.

However, few studies, if any, have looked at the issue of age preferences in men's date selection by race and sexual orientation. To contribute to the literature, we will explore this issue in men's date selection in a sample of 2,400 Internet personal ads. First, we examine whether advertisers have an age preference; second, if they do, what the age preference is; and third, whether there are any differences by race and sexual orientation.

### REASONS FOR AGE PREFERENCES

Researchers generally posit three reasons for having an age preference in date or mate selection: life stage association, biological determination, and fixation on youth. First, as a prescreening criterion, age is sometimes used as an indication of a person's life stage. For example, a person who desires financial and emotional stability might prefer someone in his/her late twenties or older with the implicit assumption that by that age, the potential partner would have been in the workforce for a few years. Another age preference argument using life stage association suggests that someone in his/her early twenties might prefer partners of a similar age since they are more likely to share similar values (e.g., enjoying life and not worrying about settling down). As one grows older, priorities often change. For example, someone in his/her thirties might decide to settle down and therefore look for a partner in a similar predicament.

Second, using a biological argument, scholars have posited that straight men are more likely to choose young female partners (Buss & Barnes, 1986). This is based on the longer period and greater fecundity of younger women. Thus, men who want children may prefer younger women. However, this argument is contentious since it is heterosexist and subjugates women.

Third, youthfulness is generally equated with attractiveness and vitality. Age is often used as an indication of youth and attractiveness. Several studies report that both straight and gay men focus on physical characteristics and attractiveness in selecting a mate more than women (Goode, 1996; South, 1991). Among those who place personal ads, more men than women list attractiveness as a criterion (Cicerello & Sheehan, 1995; Davis 1990). Similarly, in his study of men who responded to personal ads, Goode (1996) finds that men are more likely to choose attractiveness over higher socioeconomic status. In a study of gay men, Sergios and Cody (1985) report

physical attractiveness to be the most important determinant of gay men's desire to continue dating a partner. Gay men often mention appearance-related issues, such as age, race, and attractiveness (Deaux & Hanna, 1984; Hatala & Predhodka, 1996). Many posit that the gay culture is highly youth oriented. Many gay men associate beauty and virility with youth. As a result, gay men prefer young men as partners. In fact, Bartholome, Tewksbury, and Bruzzone (2000) find that almost seven times more gay men advertise for younger partners than advertise for older partners. Adam (2000) posits that "in this respect, gay culture is not much different from the enviroing society, in which the ideals of youthfulness and body fascism fall especially heavily on heterosexual women" (p. 416).

However, although both straight and gay men were found to exhibit a strong preference for young partners, whether this preference is universal remains dubious (Adam, 2000). In some cases, some men may prefer a mature partner, because of their experience. Also, others may be attracted to people around their age because they are at similar life stages and share common interests.

The issue of age preference is rarely examined in comparative terms among different racial groups or between different sexual orientations. Most information on the different age preferences is anecdotal. To contribute to the current literature on age preferences, we will systematically examine 2,400 men's personal ads to examine the extent to which age preferences in date selection differ by race and sexual orientation.

## DATA AND METHODS

The Internet provides a convenient and easily accessible outlet for personal ads, which have flourished over the years as a means of meeting new people. In contrast to traditional approaches to relationship initiation, Woll and Young (1989) posit that personal ads allow advertisers a chance to prescreen prospective dates without any in-person confrontation. Personal ads provide a non-intrusive method of studying one of the ways people pre-screen their prospective dates (for additional advantages of using this data source, see Lynn & Bolig, 1985).

The data for this paper come from 2,400 Yahoo men's personal ads in the spring of 1999. Yahoo personal ads provide a national sample in which every state in the United States is represented (see Phua and Kaufman, forthcoming). We sorted the personal ads by sexual orientation and race. Then we divided our sample collection into eight groups: four racial groups for each sexual orientation (i.e., White men seeking men, White men seeking women, Black men seeking men, Black men seeking women, Asian men seeking men, Asian men seeking women, Hispanic men seeking men, and Hispanic men seeking women). Next, we systematically took every other block of ten ads until we achieved 300 ads for each group.

Advertisers filled out some basic information and were allowed to write additional text and provide a hyperlink to their website. In constructing personal ads, individuals make requests for desired characteristics in a potential date (Phua, 2002). Age is one of the stated desired characteristics. For the purpose of this paper, we selected the following variables: race, sexual orientation, advertiser's age, and advertiser's requested age preference (if any) for partners.

We took the four given racial categories (Whites, Blacks, Asians and Hispanics) as they are. We use men seeking men and “gay,” and men seeking women and “straight,” synonymously (see Phua, Hopper, & Vazquez, 2002).

After preliminary data examinations, we decided to code advertisers into those under 30 years old, those aged 30-39, and those aged 40 and over for the following reasons. First, age preferences among advertisers tend to shift as one approaches 30 and 40 years old. Second, these breakdowns provide enough samples within each age group to ensure reliable estimates. Third, these age groups are consistent with the age categories advertisers use. Fourth, these age groups are commonly used in other studies, making it easy for future comparisons.

Finally, we coded advertisers’ age request for partners into five categories: no age request, request younger partner, request older partner, request partner around the same age, and stating “no age preference.” The difference between the first and fifth categories is that the first (no age request) includes advertisers who did not mention an age preference in their ad while the last category includes those who explicitly stated “no age preference” in their ad. To code “request younger partner” or “request older partner,” we compared the advertiser’s age with the minimum age he requested for a partner. For example, an advertiser who is 30 years old and looking for someone between 35 and 40 years old would be coded as requesting an older partner. A 30-year-old advertiser who is looking for someone 20 to 25 years old would be coded as requesting a younger partner. We coded advertisers as requesting for partners around the same age if the mean age of the requested age range was the same as the advertiser’s age. For example, a 30-year-old advertiser who requests a partner 25-35 years old would be coded as requesting a partner around his age.

In the subsequent sections, we will first provide an overall view of age preferences in the personal ads. Then we will discuss these preferences when controlling for advertisers’ age. In places where we use quotes to elaborate our findings, we do not edit the quotes. Therefore, quotes may contain spelling and/or grammatical errors. An ellipsis is used where parts of the quote are truncated. We label the quotes using advertisers’ race, sexual orientation, and age. For example, (AMM age 35) indicates that the quote is taken from a 35-year-old Asian man seeking men.

#### A PROFILE OF THE PERSONAL ADS

Table 1 shows age preference by sexual orientation and race. Men seeking men are more likely to specify an age preference than men seeking women. While one-fifth of straight male advertisers specify age as a requisite in their ads, between 41 and 64 percent of gay advertisers request for certain age groups. Gay Asian men are the most likely group to specify an age preference. Overall, a higher proportion of White men, both gay and straight, prefers younger partners when compared to minorities. The preference for younger partners, and sometimes objections to older partners, can be seen in the following excerpts from ads.

Here are some examples from straight men’s advertisements that revealed a preference for younger partners:

- Prefer a young college student but all responses accepted (WMW age 50)

- looking for a lady who is young, sweet, innocent, and wants to settle down and not have to worry about working on anything but a family (WMW no age mentioned)
- I am sure there is one worthy young lady in the Motor City (BMW age 35)
- I hope to meet or date a young (18-25) lady (AMW age 25)
- I'm looking for a sweet young girl to take care of and spoil (AMW age 25)
- I'm looking for a beautiful young soulmate that will compliment my ambitions and aspirations (HMW age 38)

[Legend: WMW = White man seeking women, BMW = Black man seeking women, AMW = Asian man seeking women, HMW = Hispanic man seeking women, WMM = White man seeking men, BMM = Black man seeking men, AMM = Asian man seeking men, and HMM = Hispanic man seeking men]

Table 1  
*Age Preferences by Sexual Orientation and Race (Percentages)*

	Men Seeking Women (N = 1200)			
	White	Black	Asian	Hispanic
Request	21	21	22	22
Around same age	4	3	3	5
Younger	11	6	11	7
Older	3	6	5	5
No age preference	3	6	3	5
No Request	78	78	78	79
	Men Seeking Men (N = 1200)			
	White	Black	Asian	Hispanic
Request	57	41	64	49
Around same age	10	5	14	6
Younger	32	13	14	15
Older	13	20	35	27
No age preference	2	3	1	1
No Request	43	59	35	51

And here are some examples from gay men's advertisements that revealed a preference for younger partners:

- Guys from the ages of 16 to 21 ONLY. I am not into going out with people who are old enough to be my father (WMM age 17)
- I don't like older types (BMM age 37)
- I don't mess with older guys ... sorry (BMM age 18)

- Looking for young guy (18-25) younger brother type—who is in shape, cute, straight acting willing to be spoiled. Prefer college students (HMM age 40)

However, there are racial differences in requests for younger partners. The contrast is sharpest for gay men. While one-third of gay White men requested younger partners, less than one-sixth of gay minority men requested younger partners. Nevertheless, some set a lower limit on the age of a partner: “If your young enough to be my kid, forget it, I don’t want to break a beginner in” (WMW age 40); or “You must be at least 18 years old” (WMM age 34).

Gay men appear more willing than straight men to date someone older. In fact, gay minority men are more likely to request older partners than to request younger partners. Thirty-five percent of gay Asian men, 27 percent of gay Hispanic men, and 20 percent of gay Black men requested older partners. Here are some examples from these groups.

- I’m looking for a sweet older man 55 to 85 for companionship and more.... I’m a healthy, attractive, and handsome young man who prefers an older grandpa type ... white hair, round belly, thick penis, heavier and financially secure (BMM age 26)
- Hey! Opposites attract, right? Older than I (preferably someone in his 30s to low 40s) (BMM age 24)
- I’m seeking a single masculine older bear between 40 and 60 years old, with moustache or beard, who is a nice guy with a good sense of humor (AMM age 35)
- Always feeling lonely after working and weekends, so desperately looking for a nice older GWM for friendship and more ... like LTR (AMM age 40)
- I like older man who is 40 to 63 years old. I am looking for my daddy in long terms relation with me (AMM age 31)
- Young college boy looking for daddy-type (HMM age 21)

While some men in all sub-groups prefer partners around their age, a comparatively higher percentage of both gay White men and gay Asian men list this preference.

- I’m looking for someone around my age, I guess maybe 16-20 (WMM age 17)
- I am mainly looking for guys that are around my age (17-23). I always get older guys replying .... Please, unless you are in that age range don’t reply (BMM age 21)
- Around my age or younger, but not too young (AMM age 34)
- Young teen seeks other young teen (HMM age 16)

#### AGE PREFERENCES ACROSS AGE GROUPS

The previous section presents an overall picture of age preferences in men’s personal ads. Earlier discussions highlight how a person’s life stage affects his age preference for a partner. For example, White men’s stronger preference for younger partners

may be due to the relatively older ages of Whites compared to minorities (only 36 percent of gay White men and 44 percent of straight White men are younger than 30 years old versus at least 60 percent of all minority groups).

To control for age effects, we grouped advertisers into those under 30 years old, those 30 to 39 years old, and those 40 years old and older (see Table 2). Across the

Table 2  
*Age Preferences by Sexual Orientation, Race, and Age (Percentages)*

	White Men Seeking Women			White Men Seeking Men		
	<30	30-39	40+	<30	30-39	40+
Request	22	19	26	62	54	54
Around same age	8	0	3	16	10	3
Younger	7	12	19	15	39	47
Older	5	1	1	31	4	2
No age preference	2	6	3	1	1	2
No Request	78	81	74	38	46	46
	Black Men Seeking Women			Black Men Seeking Men		
	<30	30-39	40+	<30	30-39	40+
Request	23	19	22	42	43	33
Around same age	4	3	0	3	7	7
Younger	3	8	22	8	24	15
Older	9	3	0	28	10	4
No Age Preference	7	5	0	2	2	7
No Request	77	81	78	58	57	67
	Asian Men Seeking Women			Asian Men Seeking Men		
	<30	30-39	40+	<30	30-39	40+
Request	20	28	22	65	60	81
Around Same Age	2	4	0	14	15	13
Younger	8	18	22	9	22	50
Older	7	1	0	42	23	19
No age preference	3	5	0	2	0	0
No Request	80	72	78	35	40	19
	Hispanic Men Seeking Women			Hispanic Men Seeking Men		
	<30	30-39	40+	<30	30-39	40+
Request	22	17	30	47	54	57
Around same age	6	1	0	5	10	4
Younger	4	12	20	6	30	46
Older	7	1	0	34	14	7
No age preference	5	3	10	1	0	0
No Request	78	83	70	53	46	43

three age groups and all races, a high proportion of straight men did not have any age request in their ads. Among straight men who stated an age preference, there is a tendency to prefer younger partners. This pattern is most evident for older straight men, regardless of race. Between 19 and 22 percent of men aged 40 and over prefer younger women. In fact, all of the straight Black and Asian men 40 and older who express an age preference request younger women. Age preferences are more varied for straight men under 30 years old. For example, the modal request (among those who state a request) is older for Blacks and Hispanics, younger for Asians, and around the same age for Whites.

Compared to straight men, gay men are more likely to make an age request in their ads across all three age groups. Overall, gay men in older age groups progressively prefer younger partners. The only exception is among gay Black men where a smaller percentage of those 40 years and older prefer younger partners than those aged 30 to 39. Unlike straight men, the racial differences are more prominent among gay men. The preference for younger partners increases dramatically with age among gay Asian, Hispanic, and White men. While only 6 percent of gay Hispanic men under 30 prefer younger partners, 30 percent of gay Hispanic men aged 30 to 39 and 46 percent of those aged 40 and older prefer younger partners. Similarly for Asian men, only 9 percent of gay Asian men under 30 prefer younger partners, while 22 percent of 30 to 39 year olds and 50 percent of those 40 years and older prefer younger partners. While one-half of gay Asian, Hispanic, and White men in their forties or older prefer younger partners, only 15 percent of gay Black men request younger partners.

The age pattern for requesting older partners is inverse to the pattern for requesting younger partners. Younger gay men are more likely than older gay men to prefer older men regardless of race, and the preference for older men declines with older age groups. The decline is most apparent for gay White men. While 31 percent of gay White men request older partners, only 4 percent of those aged 30 to 39 and 2 percent of those aged 40 and older request older partners. As a man approaches 30 years old, there seems to be an increasing shift toward preferring younger partners. However, while gay Asian men's preference for older men is lower at older ages, one-fifth of gay Asian men aged 40 and older prefer older partners. As one gay Asian man describes his preference: "I'm seeking a single masculine older bear between 40 and 60 years old" (AMM age 35). However, even gay Asian men who prefer older men tend to have an upper age limit: "I prefer guys my own age and older, but not over 45 please" (AMM age 21).

Requests for partners around the same age are not very common. About 15 percent of gay Asian men under 40 and gay White men under 30 and 10 percent of gay Hispanic and White men aged 30 to 39 prefer partners of a similar age. Less than 10 percent of all other groups state this preference.

### IS AGEISM ALIVE IN PERSONAL ADS?

The results suggest that ageism is still alive in date preference among men. Among those who state an age request, preference for a younger partner remains strong among men regardless of race and sexual orientation. In some cases, the trend is sim-

ply a demographic phenomenon. Young men initially prefer older partners because of a smaller pool of younger candidates. A straight man's ad illustrates this point: "Older woman are fine with me, but I'll take nothing younger than 16. Don't need no jailbait" (BMW age 19). As they grow older, the number of partners above 18 years old but younger than themselves begins to expand. As a result, some people change their preference toward younger partners as they grow older. However, some men do have a strong preference for youth, and that preference stays with them as they age. As a result, the age difference between them and their partners widens as they age.

Regardless of the reasons, the preference for youth disadvantages potential partners who are more mature. The subscription to youth as a prized commodity in date selection betrays stereotypes of older partners being "over-the-hill" and less desirable. Wide age gaps between partners also feed the stereotypical image of power differential between partners, where one is the provider and the other a dependent. This stereotypical partnership reflects a traditional heterosexual relationship.

What is most interesting is when we examine age preference by advertisers' race and sexual orientation. More gay men are open to older partners than straight men. In spite of the gay culture's emphasis on youth, gay men are less subject to traditional societal pressures on males to have a younger spouse. Perhaps they do not perceive traditional gender role expectations between husbands and wives as relevant. In addition, fecundity (which is indicated by younger age) is not a relevant characteristic for gay men's intended partners.

Other studies have suggested that some White men use their race status to trade for other commodified traits in partners. Thus, it would not be surprising for some White men to use their race to their advantage and trade for youth in a partner, especially a partner of color. This may be especially significant for gay men, as our study finds evidence that gay White men are more likely to prefer younger partners than gay minority men, regardless of age. However, preference for younger female partners is not necessarily a White man's prerogative. Straight men, particularly those aged 30 and older, tend to prefer younger partners. Nonetheless, White men, with a higher race status, may be more successful in trading race for youth than minority men.

The results also show that gay Asian men are the most likely group to request older partners, followed by gay Hispanic men. This seems to fit a stereotypical image of young gay Asian or Hispanic men partnering with older men, especially older White men. However, their preference for older partners does not imply an open-age ceiling. In fact, some specify an age cap to how much older an ideal partner should be, while for others, older means within a five or ten year range.

Unlike other gay men, a majority of gay Black men in all three age groups do not request an age for their potential partners. This difference is most apparent among men aged 40 and older. Only one-third of Black men in this age group made age requests, with only 15 percent requesting younger partners. This is also the only group of gay men for which the percentage requesting a preference (whether it be younger, older, or the same age) is lower than for the corresponding group of straight men. This suggests that older gay Black men are less involved in the youth culture that tends to pervade the gay community. These men are likely to have overcome several obstacles in their lifetime and therefore may prefer not to limit themselves in their search for a partner.

While this study does show that ageism is still alive in date selection among men, the picture is a more complex one than has been offered in the past. Evidently, the age of the advertisers affects the age preference of a partner—age preferences shift as people mature. Furthermore, those who occupy various statuses, especially racial minorities and gay men, will experience the dating market differently. The fact that gay minority men are more open to older partners, even as they age, is worthy of further research. Does this imply that gay minority men are aware that they may trade their youth in exchange for other commodified traits such as wealth and a higher race status (similar to findings of female advertisers)? Or are there intrinsic cultural values in gay minority culture that predispose one to be more open to older partners? Or are there unspoken gender roles associated with gay culture and minority culture that mimic traditional white heterosexual relationships? Comparisons by race and sexual orientation of male advertisers' age preference indicate that the preference for older partners is clearly neither a direct impact solely based on gay culture or minority culture. Perhaps the interaction effects of being gay and a racial minority create different rules of date selection. Race and sexual orientation are complicating factors that need to be taken into account and further explored in studies of date selection.

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