



**Emotions in digital context:
Finnish way of saying
Pick me; we could make a good couple!**

*Emociones en el contexto digital:
El modo finés de decir
Elígeme, podemos hacer una buena pareja!*

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ABSTRACT

The world has become thoroughly mediated. Dating ads are cultural representations for negotiations of shared cultural models and evident personal meanings given to hetero-relationship. There is shared knowledge about how to act in online dating sites. This has an influence on the ways average Finnish people describe the idea of desirable relationship in online dating ads. The study contained 943 Finnish heterosexual online dating ads collected in 2012. The site was chosen because dating ads here were semi-structured. Besides the structured form there was also an open space for free expression which could be utilized for making the impression. The data was analyzed using theoretically informed close readings; thematic analysis, intertextual reading

and reflexive reading. The main results of how Finnish people represent the desirable grounds for relationship in online dating ads could be categorized under three main themes: first, the quotations from other media situations (intertextual source); second, the expressions referring to Finnish ethnicity and values; and third, the religious reference. Representation was mostly textual. The analysis revealed lack of digital possibilities in presentations of oneself or relationship in online environment.

KEYWORDS

Finland; online dating; cultural model theory; heterosexual relationship.

SUMMARY

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Introduction

The great rise of internet was in mid 1990s. Almost immediately online dating became a popular way for seeking the significant other.

Mating preferences has been studied long before internet. Pamela Regan has divided theoretical approaches to human mating relationships into two broad categories. The first focuses on evolutionary forces, and the second is influenced by social forces. (Regan 2008, 4.) One of the best known evolutionary research works is *The evolution of desire: Strategies of Human Mating* by David Buss (1994). Passing the good genetic material on is the main goal of mating from evolutionary perspective. Thus the emphasis is on physical and genetic fitness. Men want women to be young (reproductive age) and healthy. Beauty reflects both youth and the state of health. Women are interested in men capable of parental investing, which means they can provide the living for the family.

Cultural model theory is one of the social context theories. Social and cultural scripts are normative expectations that define and organize social experience and are used to guide and assess social behavior (Regan 2008, 5). My inspiration derives from Naomi Quinn's research from 1979. She and her students interviewed Americans about marriage. They analyzed the transliterated texts and tried to find the main concepts people were stringing together with the concept "marriage". After that they could form the cultural model of American marriage.

First academic studies of online dating were published in the end of 1990's and in the early 2000's. They were more or less considering the possibilities of the new technology. Online dating research is a mix of studying mating preferences and gender representations in digital context. Witmer & Katzman (1997) were one of the first ones studying online identities and language use differences among male and female internet users. But they did not extend that to online dating.

Finnish mating preferences have been studied with statistics and from evolutionary psychological point of view. Dating ads as printed (inside magazines) have been studied, but Finnish online dating is still lacking the academic research.

Finnish people seek spouses via internet in all age groups although the majority is between 20-30 years old. In this article I show the main categories of how Finnish people represent the desirable grounds for relationship in online dating ads.

Daniel Miller and Don Slater (2000) studied the ethnography of the internet in Trinidad and Tobago trying to find the meaning of the media use there. Like Miller and Slater said, “that will tell us a great deal about both the internet and about Trinidad”. In my study the case is similar; focus is on online dating ads but I am interested in what does it tell about Finnish people. In the end it will tell us about the both. In this research internet is seen as a platform for certain action, i.e. providing online dating ads. Theoretically it has a lot of possibilities in digital ways of expression.

Materials and methods

The research was based on cultural model theory. Cultural model theory originates from the field of cognitive anthropology. In this field scholars seek to explain patterns of shared knowledge like Naomi Quinn did with the question of the “marriage”. Cultural model theory has many variations and interpretations so it necessarily cannot be seen as clear discipline, but rather a way of approaching the research question.

Online dating ads are always written from the perspective of thinking (consciously or not) about being in an online dating service site. People have ideas of what kind of text is usually written in that context and what kind of text is appropriate to be written in that context. They also have some idea of what kind of an audience is there to read the text written. That refers to the shared knowledge about online dating service in general.

The hypothesis of the study was that the world has become thoroughly mediated and information technology more and more involved in our daily routines. This has an influence on the ways average Finnish people describe the idea of desirable relationship in online dating ads. Hypothesis was based on the fact that online dating as an old enough a phenomena has the unique features of describing ideal spouse and the relationship in this particular context.

Dating ads are cultural representations for negotiations of shared cultural models and evident personal meanings given to hetero-relationship. Language is usually seen as the doorway to study cultural patterns. The goal is to break language down to find commonalities in the ways

people perceive the world. In this case, what kind of building material for the good relationship people offer in their online dating ads.

The study contained 943 Finnish online dating ads collected in 2012. Data was collected from internet site one could call open, i.e., site requires no registration or logging in. Data was limited for the dating ads where *True Love* or *Serious relationship* was sought after. Another limitation was heterosexuality: man looking for a woman and woman looking for a man. Ads were gathered covering all the geographical areas of the country. The study contained both genres and all age groups. Age groups started from 20-year-old persons. The oldest person looking for a spouse was a 68-year-old man.

The site was chosen because dating ads here were semi-structured. Besides the structured form there was also an open space for free expression. Open text field in addition to title and “guideline for life” were the ones person could most utilize for making the impression. Even though there was a structured part, one did not have to fill all the blanks; only some were obligatory. So the total length of dating ad could vary a lot. Only one of 943 online ads included recorded voice possibility. Creating a profile with a picture is no oddity in these times of social media. Still only 26 % had included a photo or several photos into the ad. Links could not be seen at all in the sample. Smileys in the text have spread widely. But they are just regular smileys (happy faces), no complex ones. Because of the lack of multimedial possibilities, interpretation was made from the text only.

The data was analyzed using theoretically informed close readings; thematic analysis, intertextual reading and reflexive reading. With intertextuality I refer media communicating with us through schemata familiar to us from other situations or other media. Expressions or key words most repeated were categorized by thematic choices. Analyzing the research material demanded a strong interpretation of cultural forms. The researcher, being a representative of the same culture than the research subjects, had a major significance in interpretation. Knowledge of the Finnish language, the Finnish culture and Finnish life was evident.

Results

“Single” or “available” as a relationship status is a Must in online dating ads even though it might not be the truth. Unwritten norm of the ideal relationship is definitely for faithfulness and family life. Breaking the existing harmony is not acceptable. It would be unethical in that particular context to imply that someone looking for True love in fact would be already in a relationship.

Of course, references to beauty and wealth were there, but in this study they are ignored and the focus is on more serious and fundamental basis of building a relationship. Usually the reference was about being young or feeling younger than the real age. This ideal of young lifestyle, admiring young and vital life has a connection to physical attractiveness research results more due to evolutionary psychological view than a research view interested in social forces.

Findings in this research could be categorized under three main themes: first, the quotations from other media situations (intertextual source); second, the expressions referring to Finnish ethnicity and values; and third, the religious reference. Despite the rough categorization, the finding could belong to several themes at the same time.

Well known references to love and romance as they are seen in Western societies could be categorized as intertextual, because Western popular culture is the main distributor of those. Mentioning *The Soulmate* and *The Right One* are the most common examples of popular romantic vocabulary in Finnish online dating ads.

“*Etsin kunnes löydän sin*” [transl. Looking for till I find you] was a popular quotation in the titles of online dating ads. In fact, this phrase was a title of a pop song from the year 1976. It has been played in radio a lot after 1970’s as well. Markku Aro performed that in Finnish, original version was Joe Dassin’s *Et Si Tu N’Existaits Pas* from the year 1975. Intertextual implications into contemporary Finnish popular music were also seen. E.g., “*Missä muruseni on*” [transl. Where is my baby] as a title of a dating ad is an exact title of a contemporary pop song from the year 2010. Another common title was “*Sinäkö se oot*” [transl. Is it you?], which originally was the beginning of the catchy chocolate commercial tune from the 1980s

Carpe diem as a “guideline of life” is a classic and variations of that are numerous. *Carpe diem* is a quotation known from another media situation. The movie *Dead Poets Society* (1989) was the one bringing the Latin phrase *Carpe Diem* known to all, but the message this phrase is

carrying is to be found elsewhere too, like in old traditional Finnish proverbs. Saying “*You live only once*” has almost the same meaning.

One of the most popular “guidelines of life” was “*Elä ja anna elää*” [trans. Live and let live] which is not only a quotation from George Carlin (1937-2008) an American stand-up comedian, but also a message about tolerance of difference. And of course, it also has a great resemblance to the title of a James Bond movie *Live and Let Die* (1973). Surprisingly “*Elä ja anna elää*” is also one of the mottos Finnish Alcoholics Anonymous use¹. “*Hiljaa hyvä tulee*” [transl. Easy does it] is an old Finnish proverb, but as well used in Finnish Alcoholics Anonymous guidance.

There were expressions referring to ethnicity and underlining the traditional (even agrarian) Finnish values. “*Luja tahto vie läpi harmaan kiven*” [transl. Wanting something bad enough takes you even through the rock] is an old Finnish proverb. Contemporary form about the same idea is “*Eteenpäin sanoi mummo lumessa*” [transl. On we go, said the grandmum in the deep snow]. The similar meaning could be found in “*Se mikä ei tapa, vahvistaa*” [transl. What does not kill you, makes you stronger]. They are all referring to a symbol of Finnish strength, which is called Sisu, “Finnish guts”. It carries the idea of not giving up in hard circumstances. It can be translated as strength of will, determination, perseverance, and acting rationally in the face of adversity. “*Kaveria ei jätetä*” [transl. Leave no man behind] was also quite commonly written guidance of life. In Finnish context it is most often referring into the Winter war (1939-1940) which was a military conflict between the Soviet Union and Finland. It has been a great determinant of Finnish nature since, and it has a connection with the idea of Finnish guts.

Refrains and proverbs mostly directing in old Finnish tradition were common in open text fields as well as in titles of the dating ads. Even the young people use them as a “guideline of life”. They have connection to both Finnish traditional values as well as global Christian values. Like sayings “*Elämä kantaa*” [trans. Life carries you] or “*Kyllä se siitä*” [trans. It will be just fine] have a feeling of believing in faith or destiny. One could see the leaning on someone stronger than human even though it could not be seen clearly referring to religious context. Biblical references were notable in a sense. “*Do to others as you would like them to do to you*” varied in different forms but the message was the same. In a bit more profane way one could say it: “*Smile and the world smiles you back*”. There is the same idea of reciprocity given.

¹ Alcoholics Anonymous <http://www.aa.fi/>

Discussion

Historically, the term "romance" originates with the medieval of chivalry as set out in its romance literature. During the initial stages of a romantic relationship, there is more often more emphasis on emotions rather than physical intimacy. A soul mate is believed to be the person with whom one has a feeling of deep or natural similarity, love, intimacy, sexuality or compatibility. Although there could be found some historical usage of the concept like in old Greek mythology, in current usage, soul mate usually refers to a romantic partner, with the implication of an exclusive life-long bond. The right one means the same as a soul mate; the one and only love, your other half. The concept of romantic love was popularized in Western culture. Lots of movies have soul mate themes. One of the first could have been *Wuthering Heights* (1939).

One can take the words "soul mate" or "the right one" literally, or decide the concepts being just another way of saying a good spouse. With the high rate consumption of popular culture which the Finnish people have², it is safe to claim that everyone is familiar with the terms. They are both repeated in the movies, literature, television series and pop music. One could claim, that using those terms in online dating ads also means that Finnish people consider mutual deep emotion to be one of the basic grounds of a good relationship. But In this national context it also refers to the early stage of computer dating. IEVA was the first computer program launched in Oulu Agricultural Fair in 1982. IEVA (*Isännän ja Emännän Valinta*, [transl. Choosing the Landlord and the Landlady])³ tried to find perfect matches. People filled forms about themselves but also about the preferred age, height, weight, religion and the amount of alcohol use. People were told that because it is a computer, it can accurately calculate and point out the right one for the person seeking for a mate. Because the concept was new, that kind of marketing was believable. It was also widespread. Everyone knew about IEVA, it was a subject in coffee tables and jokes. So, in Finnish context the idea of the Right One refers directly also to IEVA and the faith for the unquestionable authority of technology.

² Official Statistics of Finland (OSF): Vapaa-aikatutkimus [Leisure survey]. 2002. Helsinki: Statistics Finland [referred: 27.4.2012]. Access method: http://tilastokeskus.fi/til/vpa/2002/vpa_2002_2005-01-26_tie_001.html

³ IEVA näyttää isäntiä ja emäntiä http://yle.fi/elavaarkisto/artikkelit/ieva_naittaa_isantia_ja_emantia_18795.html#media=18798 [referred 27.4.2012]

Old traditional Finnish proverbs and phrases use to be the explanation models of the world. They are still widely used and carrying a lot of old meanings. Phrases so well-established are safe way to express oneself. They are easy pick when one does not want to or does not know how to formulate a message by oneself. “*Easy does it*” and “*Carpe diem*” kind of phrases have most resemblance to Naomi Quinn’s research results. Her results showed that when people said marriage is *like the rock of Gibraltar* or *nailed in cement*, they really meant to say that they hope marriage to be long-lasting, next to permanent (Quinn 1997a, 1997b). They were all symbols of stability and people saying that, knew other people sharing the same knowledge and understanding of the world would associate Gibraltar and cement with stability.

The highlighting of Finnish values was eminent in the results. A lot can be explained with the statistics and with the national history. Even though there has always been immigration in different reasons, Finland has stayed quite homogeneous in the ethnic sense. Systematic reception of refugees started at 1980s with Vietnamese refugees coming to Finland. Still the amounts of refugees have remained quite small⁴. Because of the lack of the wide multi-cultural atmosphere, it seems natural and safe to point out the Finnish origin. Other Finnish people are most likely the persons sharing the same interpretation of the world.

Symbols of Finnish national identity were widely seen in online dating ads. Many mentioned summer cottage or Lapland as a best way to spend a holiday. After the World War II, there was a great increase of childbirth statistics. People born between 1945-1950 form a generation which is called the baby-boomers. Time of urbanism in Finland situated in the years 1960-1970. It was the baby-boomer generation leaving the old agrarian form of life and moving into cities. Most of them wanted to maintain a connection to the countryside. Although summer cottages had their biggest break-through at 1950s, the baby-boomers are the generation owning most of the summer cottages in Finland. At the end of 2006 there were nearly half a million summer cottages in Finland, a country with habitants of nearly 5,4 million, which means almost every Finn have an experience in spending a holiday at the summer cottage. Also the respect for the nature has a long history of being one of the Finnish characteristics.

⁴ Official Statistics of Finland (OSF): Population statistics. Last updated 16.3.2012 Helsinki: Statistics Finland [referred: 27.4.2012]. Access method: http://www.stat.fi/tup/suoluk/suoluk_vaesto_en.html

Sisu has been described as being integral to understanding Finnish culture. Sisu as a word was not that often mentioned in online ads. But proverbs and phrases referring to the concept were present. Sisu, or Finnish guts, is commonly used in everyday speech to describe stoic toughness. The message is that Finnish people are strong, not weak. Even though sisu seems to be a masculine character, it is as well used with females. Common thinking claims that it is hard to live in Finland, which is an arctic country in many ways. That is why both genders have to be tough and hard working. National history shows Finnish men and women been in many ways equal partners in agrarian time.

“*Do to others as you would like them to do to you*”; even though it first seems Biblical reference, one has to remember that it is also known as The Golden rule or ethic of reciprocity that has a long history outside Christianity as well. In Finland majority of people belong to Lutheran national church⁵ and they have basic Christian education at school. In the Finnish context this phrase could be seen as something everyone was been taught at school under the Christian ethics lesson. In that point of view it is very much a representation of shared knowledge of common human ethics. Message of reciprocity in online dating context clearly means that persons claims to have a social personality. Maybe in the agrarian days and before that, the mating preferences were more about power and the capability for influence. In our days it is socially gifted people that are able to manage and get succeed in the world.

This research was about the clearly visible desirable components or groundings of hetero-relationship. Naomi Quinn noticed that hundreds of metaphors about marriage in her corpus could be divided under eight bigger categories. They were: *lastingness, sharedness, compatibility, mutual benefit, difficulty, effort, success (or failure) and risk of failure*. Next step in this research is to deepen the analysis of the relationship, and also spread the analysis covering the metaphors of desirable spouse, the most ideal woman and the most ideal man in the relationship.

Internet as a media enables a huge range of possibilities for getting the online dating ad personal and vivid. Surprisingly, the analysis showed lack of internet based means in presentations of oneself or relationship in online environment. In their research of internet in Trinidad and Tobago, Miller and Slater claimed that internet had reached the level where people focus on

⁵ Official Statistics of Finland (OSF): Population structure [e-publication]. ISSN=1797-5395. Annual Review 2010, Appendix table 8. Religious affiliation of the population 2003–2010. Updated 30.9.2011 Helsinki: Statistics Finland [referred: 27.4.2012]. Access method: http://tilastokeskus.fi/til/vaerak/2010/01/vaerak_2010_01_2011-09-30_tau_008_en.html

content and ignore the technology. Maybe that is the case with Finnish people too. Finding a relationship via media has moved almost unaltered from journal personal ads till new technical environment. Therefore, the next step in this research is also to find reasons for maintaining in mainly textual expression in the extent of this large a sample.

Conclusions

Finnish people take inspiration for shaping their emotions from contemporary popular culture as well as from old Finnish proverbs and phrases while writing online dating ads. That might indicate a very close link between generations because proverbs and phrases are mostly orally transmitted. By that link I refer to enculturation process. Enculturation is the process by which a person learns the requirements of the culture by which he or she is surrounded, and acquires values and behaviors that are appropriate or necessary in that culture. We inherit the way of having appreciation for certain features in enculturation process.

On the other hand the results give a description of desirable relationship being a mixture of old and new. While growing, the person is surrounded more and more by contemporary culture. The values stay the same but have different manifestations. Desirable Finnish person, man or woman, is determined, has guts. That feature comes from long period of time. New is the requirement of sociality involving also men. Empathy and capability for reciprocity are wanted besides being tough. Some people say these things directly in a long list, but it has become old-fashioned way of seeking a future spouse. Nobody likes lists. Instead everybody likes stories. Same message of values can be told by metaphors or aphorisms. And still they get done with success.

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