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What's in a Screen Name? Attractiveness of Different Types of Screen Names Used by Online Daters

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Abstract: This paper examined whether different types of screen names offer advantages when it comes to attracting a partner on dating sites. In the pilot study, we conducted a content analysis of real screen names to develop a typology of screen names. In the main study, we explored whether the typology predicted online daters' ratings of names, and compared the types of names that appealed to men and to women. Men more than women were attracted to screen names that indicated physical attractiveness, and women more than men were attracted to screen names that indicated intelligence or were neutral. Similarly, men more than women were motivated to contact screen names which indicated physical attractiveness and women more than men were more motivated to contact screen names which indicated intellectual characteristics or were neutral. These findings indicate that different types of screen names may elicit different reactions.

Keywords: Online dating, Internet dating, screen names, attraction, gender differences, Internet relationship

Introduction

Shakespeare once wrote "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." However, names do convey meaning. A person's name can often tell you which historical cohort or which social class they belong to. A name and the spelling of a name can even convey one's religious upbringing (e.g., for those living in Ireland a person with a name spelt Stephen is most likely a Catholic, whereas if spelt Steven is more likely to be a Protestant). Personality characteristics have been found to be ascribed to certain first names (Mehrabian, 2001). Androgynous names connote more popular, fun and less masculine characteristics for men and more popular, fun, less caring and more masculine characteristics for women than gender-specific names. Less conventionally spelled names connote uniformly less attractive characteristics and more anxiety and neuroticism compared with less common names. Individuals can also receive different treatment from others depending on their name. For instance, Mehrabian and Piercy (1993) found that rare names and rare spellings of names connoted lower levels of success, morality, popularity, warmth and cheerfulness. Similarly, Harari and McDavid (1973) found that less common names randomly assigned to student essays received significantly lower grades than more common names.

Screen name

In many types of Internet-mediated interaction, people adopt *screen names* or nicknames that are used as a personal identifier, often replacing their real name. So for example users of chatrooms will have nicknames, while people posting to forums or selling goods on auction sites will have usernames that may be very different

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to their real name. In many, if not most, instances the screen name will be the first thing we know or see about someone we are about to interact with.

Buchanan and Smith (1999) have argued that screen names can be used strategically to present a certain image of oneself. Drawing from Goffman's (1959) work on presentation of self, they contend that screen names can function as a *personal front* in the same way that more traditional presentations of the self might, such as clothing, posture, speech patterns, facial expressions and so forth. Many of these tools for image manipulation are absent from computer-mediated interactions. However, in the electronic context the screen name becomes available as another potential aspect of personal front. Given that screen names are usually self-generated, they give individuals considerable creative scope for shaping the first impressions they present to others. A screen name can thus be seen as a self-presentational tool that allows its owner to express some aspects of identity or personal attributes. These may be either real or aspirational, and can serve a useful function in defining the image a person will display (Bechar-Israeli, 1995, provides an early discussion of this in the context of the use of nicknames in interactive chat environments).

Research on auction sites has also investigated the meaning names might convey. Shohat and Musch (2003), for instance, found that sellers with German names on an online auction site were more likely to receive winning bids earlier than sellers with Turkish names. In an interesting study by Back, Schmukle, and Egloff (2008) it was found that individuals do make personality stereotypes of email addresses and these personality judgments were fairly accurate.

Online dating

One arena in which it is very important for people to make a good first impression is online dating. Although the various types of online dating sites in existence are constructed differently they do share some similar features. One of those similarities is that when people are presented with another user's profile (and often before they even see the profile) the profile is associated with a screen name. The names are fictitious in order to protect the person's offline identity. However, in addition to protecting identity, people might choose a name that they hope will draw in a person to their profile. Getting the name right on an online dating profile might be especially important given the number of people on these sites vying for others' attention. Members of dating sites typically need to sift through large numbers of potential dates and focus on those who they believe present the best prospects. Under these circumstances, making an appropriate first impression could be very important. Match.com, for example, advises their clients to think carefully about their screen name given that this is an important way to increase other's attention. They advise their users "A memorable screen name is essential so skip the usual handles like 'harry123' and go for something more provocative" (Match.com, n.d.). Research has yet to determine whether this is sage advice.

In the context of dating services, screen names could be used to explicitly say something about the person (e.g., *Cutegirl* implies something very different from *harry123*) or what they are looking for (e.g., *swm4nostringsfun* – "I'm a single white male looking for fun with no strings attached"). Such creative use of text is likely to be important in online relationship formation. For example, Whitty (2003) has argued that when examining the topic of cyber-flirting, researchers ought to be investigating how individuals elect to reconstruct the body online. She has found that people who flirt more online are better able to translate the body via text, such as through acronyms and emoticons (Whitty, 2004). Hence, to be successful at cyber-flirting one needs to be a savvy user of text, which is quite obviously a very different skill to being a successful flirter offline. This savvy use of text may well include selection of an appropriate screen name.

Gender and attraction

Existing theories of attraction may provide clues as to the kind of screen names that may increase salience of the online dater to a potential partner. There are two main theories that have been developed to explain heterosexual attraction – the evolutionary theory and the Social Role theory. Both perspectives find the same differences in the types of characteristics that men and women are attracted to; however, they provide different explanations for these results.

The evolutionary theory argues that through natural selection the human species has inherited certain traits and emotional reactions. Theorists such as Buss and Schmitt (1993) have argued that when men and women select a partner they do so in an attempt to maximise their reproductive success. Researchers have found that these sex differences are culturally universal (Schmitt, 2003). Men, therefore, are attracted to women who appear fertile. Fertility cues, according to such theorists, are youth and physical attractiveness (e.g., clear skin and lustrous hair). Women to a lesser extent are also attracted to physical attractiveness as an indicator of fertility and health. However, in contrast to men, women seek out a partner who can provide resources (e.g., money and food) that

are needed for the rearing of their offspring. Therefore women are attracted to men who are financially well-off, intelligent and industrious (e.g., in a professional job).

Not all theorists agree with evolutionary theorists' accounts for attraction. The Social Role Theory instead purports that men and women are attracted to qualities in another that are valued in a particular society (Eagly & Wood, 1999; Wood & Eagly, 2002). According to Social Role Theory men and women script their behaviour to match the gender roles promoted by society. These theorists believe that in Western societies men are attracted to women who are physically attractive because female beauty is valued in these societies. Therefore being partnered with a female who is physically attractive will increase a man's social status. In contrast, given that women are often paid less than men and children are expensive to raise, women are attracted to men who have higher socio-economic status (i.e., have a high income, professional job and of high intelligence). Social Role Theory suggests that if a society is structured differently and the values we place on men and women change then we should expect different gender differences in attraction. What is attractive to men and women should also vary according to the values of a particular culture. For example, in societies that are less sexually egalitarian, gender differences in aspects that men and women are attracted to are typically more pronounced (Eagly & Wood, 1999).

Based on both evolutionary theory and Social Role Theory, a number of predictions can therefore be made about the kind of screen names men and women would be drawn to. Men are more likely to favour potential partners whose screen names demonstrate physical attractiveness. Women, on the other hand, are likely to favour men whose screen names demonstrate wealth, intelligence and a professional occupation.

Aims

The present research addresses two questions: first, can different types of screen names be identified among those used on dating sites, and second, do such different types of names elicit different reactions from online daters? This paper reports two studies. The first study described here was a pilot study that attempted to distinguish discrete categories of online dating screen names, in order to characterise the types of names people chose to use on dating sites. The second study then set out to test and refine the typology developed in the pilot study. Following this, it examined the types of screen names that men and women online daters find more attractive and the types of names they felt more motivated to contact. Screen names are the first piece of information individuals learn about someone from this particular site and so given the amount of profiles that they have to choose from we could surmise that they might be motivated to contact some over others. While people may be motivated to contact the names they find attractive, in some instances they may be inhibited from doing so (i.e., they might surmise that attractive screen names are created by attractive individuals who might be unobtainable), in the same way that one might find a particular potential partner extremely attractive, but be reluctant to approach them due to anticipation of rejection or a feeling that they are out of your league. Thus, the most attractive names might not always be best in terms of actually attracting a partner. Accordingly, attraction to names and motivation to contact the owners of those names are examined separately.

Pilot study

Participants. The first study was intended to be a pilot study, where 500 screen names were randomly selected from a large online dating site (with permission from the manager of the online dating company). Nothing was known, or needed to be known, about the people who chose the screen names. In fact it could well be the case that an online dater had multiple profiles which would require having more than one screen name on the site.

Procedure. Prior to coding, near duplicates of screen names were deleted; that is, although all daters are required on the site to have an individual screen name, users will add numbers to the name in order to still be able to use the name (e.g., if hotpants was in the list then hotpants1, hotpants2 etc. was deleted). This reduced the final set of screen names to 468, which were then coded by two independent coders. Coders (the first author of this paper and an assistant) conducted a content analysis on the screen names and selected categories, which they believed represented groupings of screen names. Despite the theories on attraction (mentioned earlier) we decided to conduct the content analysis atheoretically. We did so in case other categories emerged in the analysis. It is worth noting that only the first coder was informed about the hypotheses. Once each coder had completed the task they met to compare the categories they had devised and the screen names placed into each category. Initial intercoder agreement was 90%; where there were disagreements between the two coders the coders discussed these discrepancies until they reached 100% agreement.

Results

The following seven categories were finally agreed upon by the two coders; Looks, Sexual, Personality, Wealthy, Classy/Intellectual, Humorous and Neutral names. Originally one of the coders had a category titled socio-economic status; however, it was agreed that this could be split into two categories, which were named by the second coder as Wealthy and Classy/Intellectual.

Given that we required category exemplars that could be rated for attractiveness by both men and women in the main study, the coders' next task was to independently eliminate any screen names that appeared gendered. For example, *Cutegirl* and *Richchick* seemed to obviously represent women and so were deleted from the lists (this was surprisingly only 11 names, 10 of which were female and 1 male). Again coders met and it was found that they had reached 100% agreement.

Finally, five screen names were selected randomly from each category and were chosen to use in the main study, where individuals were presented with these screen names and asked to rate them on attractiveness and motivation to contact (see Table 1). All names were classified. There are only four exemplars for the category of Personality given that coders could only agree on four non-gendered names for this category.

Table 1
Screen Names

Looks	Sexual	Personality	Wealthy	Classy/ Intellectual	Humerous	Neutral
Blondie	Hottie	Enigma	Wealthyandwise	Intelligent	Takeachance	Jt28
Blueeyes	Cutie	Fun2bwith	Silverspoon	Welleducated	Losttheplot	Smith48
Goodlooking	Sexy	Bubbly	Rich	Cultured	Nosugaradded	0257
Fitandattractive	Kissme	Greatpersonality	SunnyPorsche	Wellread	Madhatter	Me
Greatbody	Givemeacuddle		Millionaire	Artist	Imsweet	Justme

Discussion

Many of the categories derived in this study reflect the qualities individuals look for in a potential significant other. As highlighted earlier in this paper, evolutionary and Social Role theories argue that men and women seek physically attractive qualities out. Not surprisingly, then, we found screen names that described how someone looks. Moreover, previous research has found that women are more likely than men to seek out a partner who is well-off, has a professional job and is intelligent (e.g., Kenrick, Sadalla, Groth, & Trost, 1990; Townsend & Wasserman, 1997). These characteristics were also evident in our analysis. In previous research, humour has been found to be an effective tactic to attract the opposite sex (Buss, 1988). Given this it makes sense that many online daters elected to use a humorous screen name. Selecting a sexual name would, for some, be a sensible strategy to draw attention to a profile (Whitty & Carr, 2006). The only category that seems out of place is the neutral type of screen names, which represents a default category.

In the following study we set out to test out the typology arrived at here. In addition, we examined gender differences in attraction to and motivation to contact certain types of screen names.

Main study

The main study had two aims. First, to test the typology developed in the pilot study, by performing Principal Components Analyses on ratings of the exemplars, to see if the categories reflect latent variables influencing people's judgements about the attractiveness of screen names. That is, are there underlying factors common to groups of screen names that influence how attractive we find them? And do these factors give rise to clusters of screen names corresponding to the categories identified in the pilot study? Second, with either the same or a revised typology we wanted to examine the types of screen names men and women online daters find attractive as well as the types of screen names they are more motivated to contact. After completion of each Principal Components analysis, hypotheses about gender differences in attraction and motivation to contact were tested.

Method

Materials. An online survey was constructed using SurveyMonkey and hosted on a website run by a large online dating company. A one-item-one screen design was used. Participants had to rate attraction and motivation on separated screens and so the items were presented twice. Participants initially provided information on their gender, age, country of residence, educational level (some high school, high school, some college/university; Associates/2-year degree; Bachelors/3-4 year degree; graduate degree/Masters; and PhD/Doctoral), income

status (less than $25,000/£12,500; $25,000 to $34,999/£12,500 to £17,499; $35,000 to $49,999/£17,500 to £24,999; $50,000 to $74,999/£25,000 to £37,499; $75,000 to $99,999/£37,500 to £49,999; $100,000 to $149,999/£50,000 to £74,999; $150,000 to $249,999/£75,000 to £124,999; and $250,000+/£75,000+), relationship status (single; girlfriend/boyfriend; divorced; widowed; and separated) and sexual orientation (heterosexual; bisexual; and homosexual).

All apart from age (where they typed in a number) were answered by clicking on a radio button. Individuals were then presented with the screen names (i.e., the category exemplars developed in the pilot study) in a random order and asked to firstly rate on a 5-point Likert scale "How attractive do you find each of the following screen names?", with 1 representing *very unattractive* and 5 representing *very attractive*. Second, they were asked to rate on a 5-point Likert scale "Purely based on the screen name, how motivated would you be to contact someone with each of the following screen names?**"**, with 1 representing *extremely unmotivated* and 5 representing *extremely motivated*.

Procedure. In order to recruit participants, the manager of a large international online dating site was contacted for permission to approach their members. The head researcher for the company, who had an extensive education and training in the social sciences randomly selected 700 users who identified themselves as residents of the UK or USA and emailed them an invitation to participate in the study. Participants were recruited only from these two countries so as to restrict our sample to a Western culture. This is in part because we might expect a difference between individualistic and collectivist cultures (see Triandis, 1993). More importantly, it was critical to recruit participants familiar with the English language given that we were dealing with names and words that might not be understood or might convey a different meaning for people from different nations or those individuals who do not understand English. An email was sent to the randomly selected individuals telling them the details of the study and providing them with a link to the survey. On arriving at the website for the current study, participants first saw an informed consent page describing the study and the kind of questions that would be asked. They were told they would not receive feedback on the scales they completed and were assured of anonymity. Those who wished to continue clicked on a link that took them to the next page. On the next page participants saw brief instructions and the items outlined above. Having completed the items, they then clicked on a button labelled "Send" at the bottom of the page. They then saw a debriefing page, informing them about the purpose of the study and thanking them for their help. An email contact address was also provided on every page for respondents who wished to give us feedback or ask questions. No incentives or rewards for participation were offered or given.

Data Screening and Processing. Our original data set comprised 441 participants. All participants who answered the survey gave consent for us to use their data. We noted that most of the participants were heterosexuals, with only 35 individuals identified as homosexual. Given that the online dating site provided a service exclusively to heterosexuals it was decided to only retain those who identified themselves as heterosexual in the final sample. To detect instances of fraudulent or mischievous data entry among the remaining data, one technique often employed is to use demographic information to screen out implausible responses (e.g., very young respondents claiming to have doctoral degrees). Two people in our sample reporting very young ages claimed to have doctoral degrees as well as claiming to be earning very high incomes. These two individuals were deleted from the data set. All remaining submissions were retained, which left us with a final sample of 404 participants. The great majority of these (358) were from the USA. There were 168 (41.6%) men and 236 (58.4%) women. The largest educational group was *some college* (146, 36.1%). Ages ranged between 18 and 77, with a mean of 41.1 years (*SD* = 14.0).

Results main study

Ratings of screen names

The first phase of the analysis was to test the typology developed in the pilot study, and the extent to which the category exemplars used cluster together to form categories in the new dataset. It was envisioned that different variables might operate to influence ratings of attractiveness and likelihood to contact a dater (for example, people may rate a target as very attractive but shy away from approaching them as they feel they have little chance of success). Accordingly, separate analyses were conducted for the ratings of attractiveness and motivation to contact.

Attractiveness of Screen Names. To permit comparison of the relative attractiveness of each screen name, descriptive statistics for each are shown in Table 2, sorted in order of mean attractiveness (least to most attractive). All screen names had a range of 1 to 5, indicating that raters used the full rating scale and that there were differences in the names that different people found attractive. There were a small number of items with

missing data. Missing data were excluded listwise from the following analyses (there were 401 cases with complete data).

To examine the latent structure of the dataset, the strategy chosen was to perform Principal Components analyses, with oblique rotation. Oblique rotation was used because the categories are unlikely to be independent of each other (e.g., there is likely to be overlap between Looks and Sexual), and many exemplars might have characteristics of more than one category.

Table 2
Ratings of Attractiveness of Each Screen Names

Screen name	*M*	*SD*	*N*
0257	2.17	0.98	404
Rich	2.32	1.14	403
Millionaire	2.33	1.18	404
Jt28	2.51	1.00	404
Silverspoon	2.57	1.04	404
Smith48	2.57	1.00	404
Lostheplot	2.60	1.09	404
SunnyPorsche	2.61	1.08	404
Wealthyand wise	2.68	1.13	404
Madhatter	2.69	1.13	404
Enigma	2.74	1.10	404
Me	2.76	1.12	404
Nosugaradded	2.90	1.14	403
Cultured	2.92	1.04	404
Blondie	3.00	1.12	404
Greatbody	3.01	1.29	404
Hottie	3.01	1.30	404
Bubbly	3.03	1.08	404
Goodlooking	3.04	1.13	404
Wellread	3.04	1.04	404
Welleducated	3.16	1.11	404
Artist	3.19	1.01	404
Intelligent	3.22	1.09	404
Fitandattractive	3.24	1.16	404
Sexy	3.25	1.25	404
Greatpersonality	3.28	1.12	404
Kissme	3.29	1.20	404
Justme	3.30	1.10	404
Cutie	3.32	1.10	404
Imsweet	3.39	1.06	404
Givemeacuddle	3.45	1.14	404
Takeachance	3.48	1.02	403
Blueeyes	3.66	1.02	404
Fun2bwith	3.76	0.99	404

Note. Ratings on a scale from 1 (*very unattractive*) to 5 (*very attractive*).

A Principal Components analysis extracted seven components with Eigenvalues greater than 1.0. Examination of the scree plot suggested a solution with either four or seven components was tenable. Direct Oblimin rotations of both these solutions were performed. Of the two, the seven factor solution gave the most clearly interpretable and theoretically sensible solution. The pattern matrix for this analysis is shown in Table 3.

For the purpose of interpretation, items were selected as markers of each component on the basis of two criteria: First, that they had a loading on their primary component of .30 or greater, and second, that they did not have loadings on any other factors greater than half their primary loading (cf. Saucier, 1994). The marker items are thus relatively pure or factor univocal exemplars of their components, and do not load on multiple dimensions. Such items are shown in bold in Table 3.

Component 1 appears to revolve around physical appearance. Marker items are drawn from the Sexual (*Hottie*, *Sexy*, *Kissme*, *Cutie*) and Looks (*Greatbody*, *Goodlooking*) categories. This component was thus labelled Physical.

Table 3
Component Loadings of Screen Names Rated for Attractiveness

	Loading on component							
Screen name	**Ph**	**Ne**	**We**	**In**	**Hu**	**Pl**	**Un**	**Study 1 category**
0257	.13	**.84**	.02	−.03	.05	.11	.15	Neutral
Artist	−.06	.11	−.09	**−.69**	.14	.16	−.27	Classy/Intellectual
Blondie	.50	.05	.14	.08	.16	.06	−.40	Looks
Blueeyes	.05	.06	.04	−.12	−.09	−.23	**−.64**	Looks
Bubbly	.17	.21	.09	.02	.09	−.36	−.18	Personality
Cultured	−.07	−.03	.19	**−.64**	.08	−.20	.20	Classy/Intellectual
Cutie	**.68**	.06	−.02	−.06	.04	−.11	−.15	Sexual
Enigma	.02	−.03	−.02	−.28	**.73**	.20	−.12	Personality
Fitandattractive	.51	−.02	.09	−.34	−.11	−.02	−.05	Looks
Fun2bwith	.08	.01	−.06	−.12	−.16	**−.63**	−.26	Personality
Givemeacuddle	.42	−.13	−.05	.03	.04	−.47	−.14	Sexual
Goodlooking	**.55**	.10	.26	−.18	−.24	−.11	.03	Looks
Greatbody	**.76**	.04	.18	−.06	−.11	.10	.09	Looks
Greatpersonality	.08	.16	.04	−.37	−.22	−.44	−.15	Personality
Hottie	**.89**	.04	.04	.16	−.01	.10	.04	Physical
Imsweet	.43	−.05	−.07	−.06	.12	−.36	−.26	Humorous
Intelligent	.20	.01	−.06	**−.78**	−.01	−.02	.04	Classy/Intellectual
Jt28	−.06	**.83**	.02	−.01	−.04	−.05	−.04	Neutral
Justme	−.02	.17	−.08	−.12	.13	**−.68**	.16	Neutral
Kissme	**.76**	−.12	−.06	−.02	.19	−.16	.02	Sexual
Losttheplot	.06	.23	.00	.03	**.59**	−.03	.06	Humorous
Madhatter	−.10	.12	.07	−.06	**.62**	−.10	.15	Humorous
Me	.18	.36	.02	−.05	.15	−.40	.38	Neutral
Millionaire	.24	.00	**.73**	−.05	−.01	.16	.10	Wealthy
Nosugaradded	.02	−.09	.10	−.03	.56	−.30	.00	Humorous
Rich	.19	.00	**.76**	−.05	−.12	.04	.11	Wealthy
Sexy	**.77**	−.03	.16	−.01	−.10	.01	.08	Sexual
Silverspoon	−.12	.17	**.64**	.12	.20	−.07	−.17	Wealthy
Smith48	−.12	**.76**	.01	−.05	.02	−.03	−.15	Neutral
SunnyPorshe	.04	.10	**.62**	.05	.14	−.01	−.27	Wealthy
Takeachance	−.07	−.02	.12	.01	.12	**−.71**	−.04	Humorous
Wealthyandwise	.01	−.13	**.69**	−.30	−.08	−.09	.14	Wealthy
Welleducated	−.05	.02	.16	**−.74**	−.01	−.08	.03	Classy/Intellectual
Wellread	−.05	.09	.05	**−.69**	.18	−.03	−.01	Classy/Intellectual
Percentage variance explained	25.9	11.8	6.9	6.1	3.9	3.3	3.2	

Note. Factor components are abbreviated in the table and represent: Ph – Physical appearance, Ne – Neutral, We – Wealthy, In – Intellectual, Hu – Humorous, Pl – Playful, and Un – Undefined. Loading shown in bold indicate that the item has been identified as a marker item for purposes of interpreting that component (primary loading at least .30, no other loading more than half the primary).

Component 2 is marked exclusively by names from the Neutral category in Study 1 (*0257*, *Jt28*, *Smith48*), where the owner of the screen name does not appear to be trying to send any particular message. This component was labelled Neutral.

Similarly, Component 3 is marked by items related to wealth, all drawn from the Wealthy category in the pilot study (*Rich*, *Millionaire*, *Silverspoon*, *SunnyPorsche*, *Wealthyandwise*) and was accordingly labelled Wealthy.

Component 4 is marked by names from the Classy/Intellectual category (*Intelligent*, *Welleducated*, *Artist*, *Wellread*, *Cultured*), which appeared to relate to education and intellectual pursuits. It was therefore labelled Intellectual.

Component 5 comprised three items drawn from the Humorous (*Madhatter*, *Losttheplot*) and Personality (*Enigma*) categories of the pilot study. The meaning of this component is difficult to interpret, so it has not been named.

Component 6 was marked by names drawn from three of the categories in the pilot study (*Takeachance*, *Justme*, and *Fun2bwith*). When taken together these three names appear to share elements of light-heartedness or playfulness. The component was thus labelled Playful.

The final component was univocally marked by a single name, *Blueeyes*. Again, the meaning is difficult to interpret so no name has been assigned to this component.

Together these components accounted for 61.1% of the total variance. The most important components, Physical accounted for one quarter of the variance (25.9%) and Neutral accounted for 11.8% of the variance.

Gender differences in attraction to screen names

In the introduction we outlined predictions about the kind of screen names men and women would find attractive. In light of the results from the principal components analysis, specific predictions about each of the types of screen name are made. First, we hypothesise that men more than women will be attracted to screen names which indicate physical attractiveness (these include the screen names under Component 1 which was named the Physical category). Second, we hypothesise that women more than men would be attracted to screen names which indicate wealth (these include the screen names under Component 3 which were named Wealthy). Third, we hypothesise that women more than men would be attracted to screen names which indicate intelligence (these include the screen names under Component 4 which were named Intellectual).

Analysis. To enable testing of these hypotheses, factor scores for each of these dimensions were calculated using the regression method. All items, not just the markers used for interpretation above, were used in the calculation of factor scores. Men and women were compared on each dimension using independent *t*-tests, shown in Table 4. For components 1, 4, 5, and 6, a Levene's *F* test indicated that variances differed significantly across conditions. Tests for these comparisons were adjusted accordingly.

Table 4
Component Loadings of Screen Names Rated for Attractiveness

Component	Sex	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
1 (Physical)	M	168	0.52	0.76	10.25	396.90	< .001
	F	233	−0.37	0.98			
2 (Neutral)	M	168	−0.27	0.89	−4.72	399	< .001
	F	233	0.20	1.03			
3 (Wealthy)	M	168	−0.04	0.93	−0.63	399	.53
	F	233	0.03	1.05			
4 (Intellectual)	M	168	0.14	0.91	2.37	386.61	.02
	F	233	−0.10	1.05			
5 (Not interpreted)	M	168	−0.02	0.89	−0.41	391.95	.68
	F	233	0.02	1.08			
6 (Playful)	M	168	0.06	0.89	1.10	390.86	.27
	F	233	−0.05	1.07			
7 (Not interpreted)	M	168	0.00	1.03	−0.02	399	.99

Note. As shown in Table 3, marker items load negatively on components 4 (Intellectual), 6 (Playful) and 7 (Not interpreted). Thus a low score on one these components actually indicates a high score on the construct it represents. For example, while the mean score on Intellectual is numerically lower for women than for men, it actually indicates that women gave higher ratings to names loading on this component.

As predicted, men gave significantly higher attractiveness ratings to screen names in the Physical category than did women. Women rated the neutral and intellectual screen names as more attractive than did men. The latter result was predicted; however, the former finding on neutral screen names was not expected. Contrary to expectations, there were no differences for the Wealthy component.

Motivation to contact owners of screen names

A similar analysis was performed for the second set of ratings: how motivated people would be to contact a person with that screen name. Ratings ranked in ascending order are shown in Table 5. The ratings of motivation to contact a screen name were almost perfectly correlated with the ratings of their attractiveness ($r = .99$, $n = 34$, $p < .001$). This was the case for both men ($r = .99$, $n = 34$, $p <. 001$) and women ($r = .97$, $n = 34$, $p < .001$).

Table 5
Ratings of Motivation to Contact Each Screen Name

Screen name	*M*	*SD*	*N*
0257	2.25	1.07	404
Millionaire	2.38	1.20	404
Jt28	2.41	1.07	404
Rich	2.42	1.16	404
Silverspoon	2.46	1.03	404
Smith48	2.51	1.07	404
Sunnyporsche	2.55	1.14	404
Lostheplot	2.57	1.17	404
Madhatter	2.64	1.15	404
Wealthyandwise	2.72	1.16	404
Enigma	2.75	1.16	404
Nosugaradded	2.94	1.19	404
Me	2.95	1.15	404
Cultured	2.98	1.08	404
Hottie	2.98	1.34	404
Blondie	3.00	1.18	404
Bubbly	3.02	1.16	404
Greatbody	3.05	1.32	404
Wellread	3.12	1.07	404
Goodlooking	3.13	1.15	404
Artist	3.15	1.01	404
Welleducated	3.15	1.14	403
Sexy	3.18	1.28	404
Fitandattractive	3.22	1.19	404
Kissme	3.25	1.23	404
Intelligent	3.29	1.07	404
Justme	3.33	1.10	404
Cutie	3.35	1.15	404
Imsweet	3.36	1.07	404
Greatpersonality	3.41	1.13	404
Givemeacuddle	3.44	1.22	404
Takeachance	3.53	1.09	404
Blueeyes	3.65	1.04	404
Fun2bwith	3.76	1.00	404

Note. Ratings on a scale from 1 (*extremly unmotivated*) to 5 (*extremly motivated*).

Once again, Principal Components extraction was employed to explore the latent structure of the motivation ratings. This identified six components with Eigenvalues greater than 1.0. Examination of the scree plot suggested a 5 component solution was best. This solution was rotated using Direct Oblimin, producing a pattern matrix shown in Table 6.

Application of the same rule as before (primary loading over 3.0, no other loading greater than half primary) led to identification of factor-univocal marker items, which are shown in bold in Table 6.

Component 1 was marked by the items *Hottie*, *Sexy*, *Cutie*, *Greatbody*, *Kissme*, *Goodlooking*, *Imsweet*, *Givemeacuddle*, *Blondie*, *Fitandattractive* and *Blueeyes*. These items are drawn from the Looks and Sexual categories in the pilot study (five from each) with one item, Imsweet, coming from the Humorous category. For purposes of interpretation, this component was labelled Physical due to the combination of appearance and sex related items.

Component 2 was marked by four items, all coming from the Neutral category in Study 1 (*0257*, *Jt28*, *Smith48*, *Me*). Again, this was labelled Neutral.

Component 3 was not marked by any factor-univocal items, which makes interpretation difficult. All items from the Wealthy category of the pilot study had loadings above 3.0 on this component. However, there were also substantial cross-loadings, and items from other categories also had loadings which reached this level. It is likely that this component is wealth-related, but may be blended with other constructs. With this in mind, the variable was tentatively labelled Wealthy but its fuzzy nature must be recognized in interpretation.

Table 6
Component Loadings of Screen Names Rated for Motivation to Contact

	Loading on component					
Screen name	**Ph**	**Ne**	**We**	**In**	**Un**	**Study 1 category**
0257	−0.12	**0.89**	0.10	0.03	0.05	Neutral
Artist	−0.11	−0.12	0.07	**−0.60**	0.30	Classy/Intellectual
Blondie	**0.68**	0.04	0.16	0.09	0.16	Looks
Blueeyes	**0.40**	0.16	−0.12	−0.18	0.02	Looks
Bubbly	0.46	0.28	−0.19	−0.03	0.09	Personality
Cultured	−0.07	0.04	0.03	**−0.81**	0.09	Classy/Intellectual
Cutie	**0.85**	−0.04	−0.04	0.02	−0.01	Sexual
Enigma	−0.05	−0.01	0.11	−0.21	**0.67**	Personality
Fitandattractive	**0.65**	−0.10	0.12	−0.27	−0.07	Looks
Fun2bwith	0.43	0.19	−0.44	−0.20	0.00	Personality
Givemeacuddle	**0.68**	−0.03	−0.33	0.00	0.17	Sexual
Goodlooking	**0.74**	0.01	0.18	−0.21	−0.19	Looks
Greatbody	**0.83**	−0.02	0.19	−0.08	−0.16	Looks
Greatpersonality	0.31	0.30	−0.27	−0.48	−0.20	Personality
Hottie	**0.90**	0.01	0.19	0.22	−0.02	Physical
Imsweet	**0.69**	−0.02	−0.30	−0.09	0.15	Humorous
Intelligent	0.07	0.01	0.00	**−0.82**	−0.07	Classy/Intellectual
Jt28	−0.13	**0.90**	0.08	0.02	0.01	Neutral
Justme	0.14	0.41	−0.34	−0.29	0.03	Neutral
Kissme	**0.81**	−0.04	−0.12	0.00	0.09	Sexual
Losttheplot	−0.03	0.11	0.02	0.02	**0.76**	Humorous
Madhatter	−0.06	0.08	−0.03	−0.02	**0.78**	Humorous
Me	0.15	**0.55**	−0.25	−0.16	0.04	Neutral
Millionaire	0.36	0.13	0.63	−0.24	−0.02	Wealthy
Nosugaradded	0.21	0.06	−0.21	−0.07	**0.61**	Humorous
Rich	0.35	0.20	0.62	−0.23	−0.04	Wealthy
Sexy	**0.88**	−0.07	0.19	0.06	−0.10	Sexual
Silverspoon	0.24	0.33	0.32	0.00	0.29	Wealthy
Smith48	−0.14	**0.85**	0.06	0.06	0.10	Neutral
SunnyPorsche	0.41	0.14	0.32	−0.03	0.29	Wealthy
Takeachance	0.30	0.16	−0.42	−0.19	0.21	Humorous
Wealthyandwise	0.26	0.08	0.47	−0.47	0.00	Wealthy
Welleducated	−0.04	0.01	0.03	**−0.85**	0.02	Classy/Intellectual
Wellread	−0.11	0.09	0.00	**−0.79**	0.08	Classy/Intellectual
Percentage variance explained	33.2	13.0	7.0	5.8	4.2	

Note. Factor components are abbreviated in the table and represent: Ph – Physical appearance, Ne – Neutral, We – Wealthy, In – Intellectual, and Un – Undefined. Loading shown in bold indicate that the item has been identified as a marker item for purposes of interpreting that component (primary loading at least .30, no other loading more than half the primary).

Component 4 was marked by five items, all coming from the Classy/Intellectual category in the pilot study (Intelligent, Wellread, Cultured, Welleducated, Artist). This was again labelled Intellectual. Again, loadings on this component were all negative.

Component 5 comprised three items from the Humorous category (Madhatter, Losttheplot, Nosugaradded) and one from the Personality category (Enigma). This is similar to Component 5 in the attractiveness analysis, and is similarly difficult to interpret so was not labelled.

Together these components accounted for 63.1% of the total variance. The most important components were again, Physical accounting this time for one third of the variance (33.2%) and Neutral accounting for 13.0% of the variance.

Gender differences in motivation to contact screen names

Again, in light of the results revealed in the principal components analysis, specific predictions were made about motivation to contact each type of screen name. Our fourth hypothesis is that men more than women would be motivated to contact screen names which indicate physical attractiveness (these include screen names under Component 1 which was named the Physical category). The fifth hypothesis is that women more than men

would be motivated to contact screen names which indicate wealth. The sixth and final hypothesis is that women more than men would be motivated to contact screen names which indicate intelligence (these include screen names under Component 4 which was named the Intellectual category).

Analysis. Once again, factor scores for each of these dimensions were calculated using the regression method. Men and women were compared on each dimension using independent *t*-tests, shown in Table 7. For Components 1 and 2, a Levene's *F* test indicated that variances differed significantly across conditions. Tests for these comparisons were adjusted accordingly.

Table 7
Comparison of Component Scores (Motivation) for Men and Women

Component	Sex	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
1 (Physical)	M	168	0.47	0.84	8.88	387.05	< .001
	F	235	−0.34	0.97			
2 (Neutral)	M	168	−0.25	0.87	−4.53	391.76	< .001
	F	235	0.18	1.05			
3 (Wealthy)	M	168	0.08	0.94	1.33	401	.18
	F	235	−0.06	1.04			
4 (Intellectual)	M	168	0.12	0.91	2.09	401	.04
	F	235	−0.09	1.05			
5 (Not interpreted)	M	168	−0.04	0.95	−0.64	401	.52
	F	235	0.03	1.04			

Note. As shown in Table 6, marker items load negatively on component 4. Thus a low score on this component actually indicates a high score on the construct it represents. While the mean score on Intellectual is numerically lower for women than for men, it actually indicates that women gave higher ratings to names loading on this component.

Men and women differ significantly in their motivation to contact the Physical, Neutral and Intellectual screen names. As predicted, men rated their motivation to contact the Physical names higher than did women. In addition, women were significantly more motivated to contact Intellectual and Neutral names than were men. However, women were not more motivated than men to contact Wealthy screen names. Overall, it is noteworthy that the same underlying dimensions – Physical, Neutral, and Intellectual – appear to influence ratings of both attractiveness of screen names and raters' motivation to contact them. These variables correspond very closely to categories arising from the content analysis in the pilot study (the Physical dimension here is a combination of the Sexual and Looks categories from the pilot study).

While the factor scores enable us to compare the relative importance of the Physical, Neutral and Intellect-related characteristics of screen names as determinants of their attractiveness to men and women, they tell us nothing about the absolute level of attractiveness of names with that characteristic.

New indices were created for the average attractiveness and motivation to contact of names marking each of those factors on which men and women differed (Physical, Neutral and Intellectual components). These variables were created by calculating the mean rating given to each of the screen names marking each of these components. So for example, the attractiveness score for the Physical screen names was the mean rating given to the names *Hottie*, *Sexy*, *Kissme*, *Cutie*, *Greatbody*, and *Goodlooking*. This procedure was repeated for the ratings of motivation to contact.

Single-sample t-tests were used to compare these scores with the midpoint (3) of the rating scale. The scales were anchored at 1 (*very unattractive*) and 5 (*very attractive*). A rating of 3 would indicate a neutral perception of the name. For each of the categories, a mean score significantly above 3 would indicate that the names in that category were on average found attractive, while a score below 3 would indicate unattractiveness. The results of these analyses are shown in Table 8.

On average, men rated Physical names as attractive and were motivated to contact them. On the other hand, women rated them as unattractive, but were neutral (did not differ from the midpoint of the response scale) in how motivated they were to contact them.

Both men and women rated Neutral names as being unattractive. Both sexes were unmotivated to contact these names. The previous analyses with factor scores indicated that men liked these Neutral names less than did

women. The current analyses demonstrate that neither sex actually likes them, it is just that men dislike them more.

Table 8
Comparison of Mean Attractiveness and Motivation Ratings With Scale Midpoint

Category	Sex	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Attraction							
Physical names	Both	404	3.15	.97	3.15	403	.002
	M	168	3.61	.76	10.42	167	< .001
	F	236	2.83	.98	−2.70	235	.007
Neutral names	Both	404	2.42	.84	−13.97	403	< .001
	M	168	2.15	.76	−14.50	167	< .001
	F	236	2.61	.84	−7.17	235	< .001
Intellectual names	Both	404	3.11	.82	2.59	403	.01
	M	168	3.00	.74	.00	167	1.00
	F	236	3.18	.86	3.22	235	.001
Motivation to contact							
Physical names	Both	404	3.24	.91	5.20	403	< .001
	M	168	3.68	.75	11.85	167	< .001
	F	236	2.92	.88	−1.43	235	.153
Neutral names	Both	404	2.53	.90	−10.51	403	< .001
	M	168	2.32	.80	−11.10	167	< .001
	F	236	2.68	.94	−5.22	235	< .001
Intellectual names	Both	403	3.14	.87	3.18	402	.002
	M	168	3.05	.80	.83	167	.41
	F	235	3.20	.91	3.53	234	.001

Note. Ratings on a scale from 1 (*very unattractive* or *extremly unmotivated*) to 5 (*very attractive* or *extremly motivated*).

For names in the Intellectual category, men's ratings of attractiveness and motivation to contact did not differ significantly from the midpoint of the rating scale: men were entirely neutral with respect to these names. However, women both rated them as attractive and were motivated to contact them.

Further evidence for gender differences in reactions to screen names comes from a comparison of the mean ratings given to each name (regardless of which component it loads on) by men and women. A paired-samples *t*-test indicated that men (M = 3.04, SD = 0.52) and women (M = 2.95, SD = 0.38) did not differ in the mean attractiveness rating they gave each name, $t(33) = 1.32$, $p = .20$. However, men (M = 3.10, SD = 0.55) were significantly more motivated than women (M = 2.92, SD = 0.39) to contact all the names in general, $t(33) = 2.21$, $p = .03$. Care should be taken when interpreting these results, because the number of names rated (34) was low, leading to an analysis of limited power.

Discussion

In the main study we first set out to test the typology developed in the content analysis of screen names set out in the pilot study. To reiterate, the categories developed by the coders in the pilot study included: Looks, Sexual, Personality, Wealthy, Classy/Intellectual, Humorous and Neutral. The Principal Components analysis carried out in the main study revealed similar clusters.

For the question of which screen names participants rated as more attractive, seven categories were identified, including: Physical (a combination of Sexual and Looks), Neutral (exclusively from the Neutral category), Wealthy (exclusively from the Wealthy category), Intellectual (exclusively from the Classy/Intellectual category), unnamed (a combination of Humorous and Personality categories), Playful (a combination of Personality, Neutral and Humorous), and a final Unnamed category consisting of one item, *Blueeyes*.

For the question of which screen names participants rated as more motivated to contact, five categories were identified, including, Physical (including items from the Looks and Sexual category and one for the Humorous category), Neutral (exclusively from the Neutral category), Wealthy (mostly from our original Wealthy category), Intellectual (mostly from our original Classy/Intellectual category), and one Unnamed category (comprising of items from the Humorous and Personality categories).

It should be noted that the categories derived from the Principal Components analysis for attraction and motivation were very similar. This suggests that the same variables are salient in people's decisions about what is attractive and who they would like to contact. This notion is reinforced by the fact that the average attractiveness and motivation ratings assigned to each screen name were so strongly correlated as to suggest that that there was effectively a one-to-one correspondence between how attractive a name was found and how motivated people were to contact it (r = .99, n = 34, p < .001). This provides strong evidence against our speculation that people might be inhibited from contacting more attractive names (due to anticipated rejection for example).

One of the main differences between the attractiveness and motivation components was the absence of a playful variable in the analysis of those names that individuals felt compelled to contact. This suggests that while the playfulness of screen names might have a role to play in determining attractiveness, it is not a major influence on the decision to contact people. The other main discrepancy is that while there is some evidence of a wealth variable in the analysis of motivation to contact it is less clearly defined than in the ratings of attractiveness.

It is also important to reflect on some of the categories generated in the pilot study that are absent in the analysis performed in the main study. Personality and humour did not emerge as distinct categories in either the Principal Components analysis of attractive screen names or motivation to contact. Personality might not have emerged in the analysis because there are a number of dimensions of personality (e.g., being enigmatic is possibly a very different personality characteristic to being bubbly) and so having a category simply devoted to personality is possibly not enough. Rather than a screen name demonstrating personality, it might have been better to demonstrate a certain type of personality. For example, Sprecher (1989) found that expressionism was a trait that women value in a potential partner. It may even be more important to demonstrate a personality that resonates with one's own (Feingold, 1991, found that finding a partner similar to themselves was important for women). Humour was also absent and this could well be because humour is often very subjective. As Martin (1998) has pointed out, there is general agreement amongst scholars that there is "considerable variability across individuals in the degree to which they possess a sense of humor" (p. 15). Therefore, while some might find a screen name such as Sugaradded to be humorous, this might not be the case for all people.

In considering which screen names individuals overall found more attractive (as shown in Table 2), the more playful and flirtatious names, such as Takeachance, Imsweet, Givemeacuddle, and Fun2bwith, and descriptors related to physical attractiveness or appearance, such as Cutie and Blueeyes topped the list. Notably, men and women did not differ in attractiveness ratings given to each screen name.

Similar results were found for those screen names individuals felt more motivated to contact. The notably less attractive screen names were the neutral ones, (e.g., *0257*) and the wealthy ones (e.g., *Rich* and *Millionaire*). These were also the screen names that individuals would be less motivated to contact. It appears that match.com (n.d.) is only partly correct in advising online daters to be provocative in their choice of names. Less flirtatious or neutral screen names are indeed less likely to attract attention; however, if one is to select a more provocative name that reflects physical characteristics they are likely to be more successful than a provocative name that indicates wealth. Notably, men were significantly more likely to contact all names in general.

The hypotheses developed for gender differences and attractive screen names were only partly supported. Hypothesis 1 which proposed that men more than women would be attracted to screen names which indicate physical attractiveness was supported. Hypothesis 2 was only partly supported, finding that women were more attracted than men to intellectual screen names. These results support both the evolutionary and social roles theories of attraction.

Contrary to expectations, we found no gender differences in ratings of wealth-related screen names. Perhaps this reflects a change in society in which a wealthy partner is valued by both men and women. However, it is noteworthy that the mean attractiveness scores of the wealthy screen names, such as *Millionaire* and *Rich* were quite low, suggesting that they were found to be less attractive. It might be that online daters interpret using such screen names as showing off about one's wealth. Doing so might reflect a superficial personality, and be a behaviour low in social desirability. Alternatively, it might well be that these types of screen names prime distrust: experienced users of online dating sites (or even people who had paid attention to media coverage of them) might well be aware of the amount of lying that seems to take place on these sites (Whitty & Carr, 2006) and thus be suspicious of claims about wealth.

Another factor influencing the attractiveness of wealth-related screen names could be the personal wealth of the rater. Those who are more wealthy would be less interested in the wealth of a potential mate, as they would not need to rely on them for financial support. In most societies, income differs by gender, with men usually earning more. Following the logic above, women (less wealthy) would pay more attention to wealth than men (more

wealthy). Therefore any sex difference could actually be due to wealth differences. This would be a rival explanation to the theories already cited. However, the role of wealth could be ruled out by including it as a covariate.

In the analysis of attraction to screen names, a one-way ANCOVA indicated that men and women did not differ in their ratings of wealth-related names as attractive even when income was included as a covariate, $F(1, 398) = .431$, $p = .512$. Similarly, in the analysis of motivation to contact screen names, a one-way ANCOVA indicated that men and women did not differ in their self-rated motivation to contact wealth-related names even when income was included as a covariate, $F(2, 400) = 1.392$, $p = .239$. We may therefore conclude that the non-difference between men and women in terms of their attraction to wealth-related names was not a function of the personal income of the raters.

The hypotheses developed for gender differences in motivation to contact screen names were both supported, thus lending more support to both the evolutionary and social role theories of attraction. Hypothesis 3 which proposed that men more than woman would be more motivated to contact screen names which indicate physical attractiveness was supported. Hypothesis 4 which proposed that women more than men would be more motivated to contact screen names which indicate intellectual characteristics was also supported. Again unexpectedly, women more than men were motivated to contact neutral screen names.

The present findings lend support to Buchanan and Smith's (1999) suggestion that screen names can, in Goffman's terms, work as a personal front: they certainly appear to affect the reactions of observers. We found that not all screen names are treated equally, and that some screen names are deemed more attractive and more desirable to contact than others. Furthermore, the appeal a screen name has varies according to gender. Therefore, choosing a certain screen name may well give individuals an advantage in online dating.

This study suggests that men looking for a date should consider selecting a screen name that demonstrates their intellectual abilities. In contrast, women might fare better if they select a name that demonstrates their physical characteristics. These results are partly in line with previous research on offline attraction, where men have been found to be more attracted to physical qualities and women more attracted to socio-economic status. Previous research on online dating has also found that men are more likely than women to seek out a potential partner who is physically attractive (Whitty & Carr, 2006).

Of course these results only tell part of the story. How great an impact screen names have on the overall likelihood of being selected from the sea of other potential dates is yet to be determined. Another limitation of this research is that overtly gendered names were omitted from the content analysis in the pilot study. Hence, we do not know how well liked these types of screen names are or if men and women perceive them differently. Furthermore, the present data only reflect the preferences of heterosexual respondents. Arguably, other factors could influence the attractiveness of screen names to homosexual or bisexual online daters. The typology of names described here should therefore not be interpreted as a cast-iron delineation of all the types of names online daters may use, and it would be desirable to replicate the hypothesis tests with a further independent dataset. However, it does provide evidence that particular types of screen names are identifiable, and that these function differentially in attracting others, in ways that are at least partly consistent with established theories of attraction.

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