FULL COMMENT

Dataclysm: The data guru for a popular dating site explains what men and women want from a mate

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Until 30, a woman prefers slightly older guys; afterward, she likes them slightly younger. But men never grow up. A 50-year-old man's idea of what's hot is the same as a college kid's.   Fotolia

Up where the world is steep, like in the Andes, people use funicular railroads to get where they need to go — a pair of cable cars connected by a pulley far up the hill. The weight of the one car going down pulls the other up; the two vessels travel in counterbalance.

I've learned that that's what being a parent is like. If the years bring me low, they raise my daughter, and, please, so be it. I surrender gladly to the passage, of course, especially as each new moment gone by is another I've lived with her, but that doesn't mean I don't miss the days when my hair was actually all brown and my skin free of weird spots. My girl is two, and I can tell you that nothing makes the arc of time more clear than the creases in the back of your hand as it teaches plump little fingers to count: one, two, tee.

But some guy having a baby and getting wrinkles is not news. You can start with whatever the Oil of Olay marketing department is running up the pole this week (as I'm writing, it's the idea of "colour correcting" your face with a creamy beige paste that is either mud from the foothills of Alsace or the very essence of bullshit) and work your way back to myths of Hera's jealous rage. People have been obsessed with getting older, and with getting uglier because of it, for as long as there've been people and obsession and ugliness. "Death and taxes" are our two eternals, right? And depending on the next U.S. government shutdown, the latter is looking less and less reliable. So there you go.

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When I was a teenager — and it shocks me to realize I was closer then to my daughter's age than to my current 38 — I was really into punk rock, especially pop-punk. The bands were basically snottier and less proficient versions of Green Day. When I go back and listen to them now, the whole phenomenon seems supernatural to me: grown men brought together in trios and quartets by some unseen force to whine about girlfriends and what other people are eating. But at the time, I thought these bands were the shit. And because they were too cool to have posters, I had to settle for arranging their album covers and flyers on my bedroom wall. My parents have long since moved — twice, in fact. I'm pretty sure my old bedroom is now someone else's attic, and I have no idea where any of the paraphernalia I collected is. Or really what most of it even looked like. I can just remember it and smile, and wince.

Today, an 18-year-old tacks a picture on his "wall," and that electronic wall will never come down. Not only will his 38-year-old self be able to go back, pick through the detritus, and ask "What was I thinking?," so can the rest of us, and so can researchers.

Moreover, they can do it for all people, not just one guy. And, more still, they can connect that 18th year to what came before and what's still to come, because the wall, covered in totems, follows him from that bedroom in his parents' house to his dorm room to his first apartment to his girlfriend's place to his honeymoon, and, yes, to his daughter's nursery. Where he will proceed to paper it over in a billion updates of her eating mush.

A new parent is perhaps most sensitive to the milestones of getting older. It's almost all you talk about with other people, and you get actual metrics at the doctor's office every few months. But the milestones keep coming long after babycenter.com and the pediatrician quit with the reminders. It's just that we stop keeping track. Computers, however, have nothing better to do; keeping track is their only job. They don't lose the scrapbook or travel, or get drunk or grow senile, or even blink. They just sit there and remember. The myriad phases of our lives, once gone but to memory and the occasional shoebox, are becoming permanent, and as daunting as that may be to everyone with a drunk selfie on Instagram, the opportunity for understanding, if handled carefully, is self-evident.

What I've just described, the wall and the long accumulation of a life, is what sociologists call *longitudinal* data — data from following the same people, over time. Also, I was speculating about the research of the future. We don't have these capabilities quite yet because the Internet, as a pervasive human record, is still too young. As hard as it is to believe, even Facebook, touchstone and warhorse that it is, has only been big for about six years. It's not even in middle school!

Information this deep is still something we're building toward, literally, one day at a time. In 10 or 20 years, we'll be able to answer questions like ... well, for one, how much does it mess up a person to have every moment of her life, since infancy, posted for everyone else to see? But we'll also know so much more about how friends grow apart or how new ideas percolate through the

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mainstream. I can see the long-term potential in the rows and columns of my databases, and we can all see it in, for example, the promise of Facebook's Timeline feature: for the passage of time, data creates a new kind of fullness, if not exactly a new science.

Even now, in certain situations, we can find an excellent proxy, a sort of flashforward to the possibilities. We can take groups of people at different points in their lives, compare them, and get a rough draft of life's arc.

This approach won't work with music tastes, for example, because music itself also evolves through time, so the analysis has no control. But there are fixed universals that can support it, and, in the data I have, the nexus of beauty, sex, and age is one of them.

Here, the possibility already exists to mark milestones, as well as lay bare vanities and vulnerabilities that were perhaps till now just shades of truth. So doing, we will approach a topic that has consumed authors, painters, philosophers and poets since those vocations existed, perhaps with less art (though there is an art to it), but with a new and glinting precision. As usual, the good stuff lies in the distance between thought and action, and I'll show you how we find it.

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I'll start with the opinions of women — all the trends below are true across my sexual data sets, but for specificity's sake, I'll use numbers from OkCupid, the dating web site that I co-founded. Figure 1 lists, for a woman, the age of men she finds most attractive. If I've arranged the data unusually, you'll see in a second why.
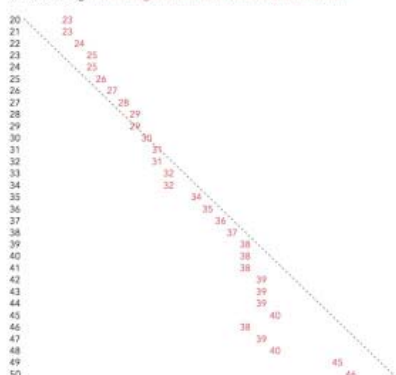
Reading from the top, we see that 20- and 21-year-old women prefer 23-year-old guys; 22-year-old women like men who are 24, and so on down through the years to women at 50, who we see rate 46-year-olds the highest. This isn't survey data, this is data built from tens of millions of preferences expressed in the online act of finding a date, and even from just following along the first few entries, the gist of the Figure is clear: A woman wants a guy to be roughly as old as she is. Pick an age on the left under 40, and the number beside it is always very close.

a woman's age vs. the age of the men who look best to her

20	23
21	23
22	24
23	25
24	25
25	26
26	27
27	28
28	29
29	29
30	30
31	31
32	31
33	32
34	32
35	34
36	35
37	36
38	37
39	38
40	38
41	38
42	39
43	39
44	39
45	40
46	38
47	39
48	40
49	45
50	46

The broad trend comes through better when I let lateral space reflect the progression of the values, as in Figure 2. That dotted diagonal is the "age parity" line, where the male and female years would be equal. It's not a canonical math thing, just something I overlaid as a guide for your eye. (Often there is an intrinsic geometry to a situation — it was the first science for a reason and we'll take advantage wherever possible.)

a woman's age vs. the age of the men who look best to her

20	23
21	23
22	24
23	25
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25	26
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28	29
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37	36
38	37
39	38
40	38
41	38
42	39
43	39
44	39
45	40
46	38
47	39
48	40
49	45
50	46

This particular line brings out two transitions, which coincide with big birthdays. The first pivot point is at 30, where the trend of the numbers on the right — the ages of the men — crosses below the line, never to cross back. This is the data's way of saying that until 30, a woman prefers slightly older guys; afterward, she likes them slightly younger. Then at 40, the progression breaks free of the diagonal, going practically straight down for nine years.

That is to say, a woman's tastes appear to hit a wall. Or a man's looks fall off a cliff, however you want to think about it. If we want to pick the point where a man's sexual appeal has reached its limit, it's there: 40.

The two perspectives (of the woman doing the rating and of the man being rated) are two halves of a whole. As a woman gets older, her standards evolve, and from the man's side, the rough l: l movement of the numbers implies that as he matures, the expectations of his female peers mature as well, practically year-for-year. He gets older, and their viewpoint accommodates him. The wrinkles, the nose hair, the renewed commitment to cargo shorts — these are all somehow satisfactory, or at least offset by other virtues.

Compare this to the free fall of scores going the other way, from men to women.

Figure 3 makes a statement as stark as its own negative space. A woman's at her best when she's in her very early twenties. Period. And really my plot doesn't show that strongly enough. The four highest-rated female ages are 20, 21, 22 and 23 for every group

a man's age vs. the age of the women who look best to him

20	20
21	20
22	21
23	21
24	21
25	21
26	22
27	21
28	20
29	20

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of guys but one. You can see the general pattern in Figure 4, where I've overlaid shading for the top two quartiles (that is, top half) of ratings. I've also added some female ages as numbers in black on the bottom horizontal to help you navigate.

Again, the geometry speaks: The male pattern runs much deeper than just a preference for 20-year-olds. And after he hits 30, the latter half of our age range (that is, women over 35) might as well not exist. Younger is better, and youngest is best of all, and if "over the hill" means the beginning of a person's decline, a straight woman is over the hill as soon as she's old enough to drink.

Of course, another way to put this focus on youth is that males' expectations never grow up. A fifty-year-old man's idea of what's hot is roughly the same as a college kid's, at least with age as the variable under consideration.

If anything, men in their 20s are the ones who are more willing to date older women. That pocket of middling ratings in the upper right of Figure 4, that's your "cougar" bait, basically. Hikers just out enjoying a nice day, then bam.

In a mathematical sense, a man's age and his sexual aims are independent variables: The former changes while the latter never does. I call this Wooderson's law, in honor of its most famous proponent, Matthew McConaughey's character from *Dazed and Confused*: "That's what I like about these high school girls. I get older, they stay the same age."

a man's age *vs. the age of the women who look best to him*
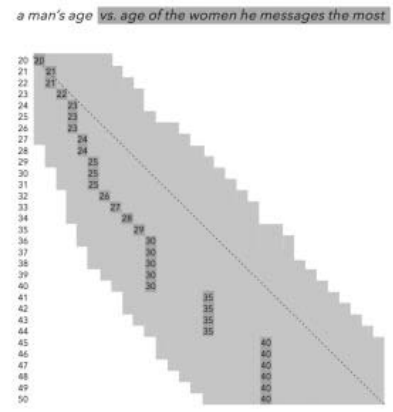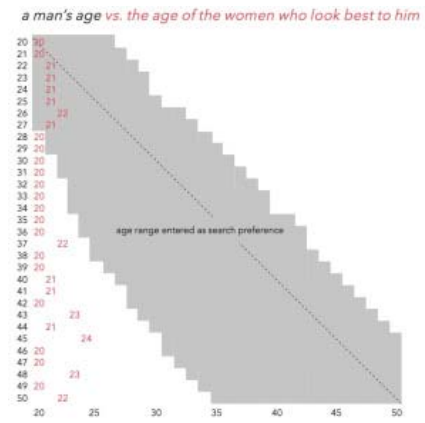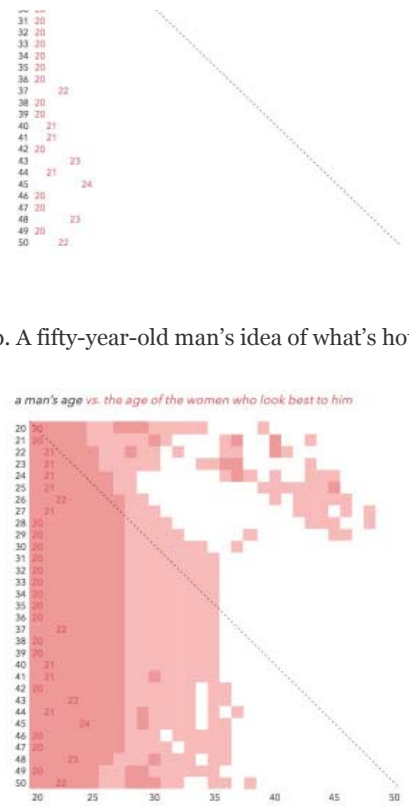
Unlike Wooderson himself, what men *claim* they want is quite different from the private voting data we've just seen. The ratings described above were submitted without any specific prompt beyond "Judge this person." But when you ask men outright to select the ages of women they're looking for, you get different results.

The gray space in Figure 5 is what men *tell* us they want when asked. Since I don't think that anyone is intentionally misleading us when they give OkCupid their preferences — there's little incentive to do that, since all you get then is a site that gives you what you know you don't want — I see this as a statement of what men imagine they're supposed to desire, versus what they actually do. The gap between the two ideas just grows over the years, although the tension seems to resolve in a kind of pathetic compromise when it's time to stop voting and act, as you'll see.

a man's age *vs. the age of the women who look best to him*

age range entered as search preference

Figure 6, identifies the age with the greatest density of contact attempts. These most-messaged ages are described by the darkest gray squares drifting along the left-hand edge of the larger swath. Those three dark verticals in the graph's lower half show the jumps in a man's self-concept as he approaches middle age. You can almost see the gears turning. At 44, he's comfortable approaching a woman as young as 35. Then, one year later ... he thinks better of it. While a nine-year age difference is fine, 10 years is apparently too much.

a man's age *vs. age of the women he messages the most*

It's this kind of calculated no-man's-land — the balance between what you want, what you say, and what you do — that real romance has to occupy: No matter how people might vote in private or what they prefer in the abstract, there aren't many 50-year-old men successfully pursuing 20year-old women. For one thing, social conventions work against it. For another, dating requires reciprocity: What one person wants is only half of the equation.

When it comes to women seizing the initiative and reaching out to men, because of the female-to-male attraction ratio we saw at the beginning of the chapter (l year: l year), plus the nonphysical motivations that push women toward older men — economics, for example — women send more, rather than fewer, messages to a man as he gets older, up until the early 30s. From there, the amount of contact declines, but no faster than the general number of available females itself is shrinking.
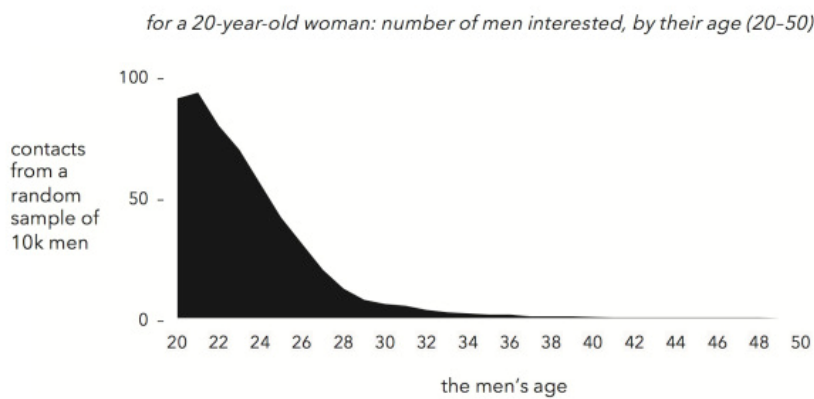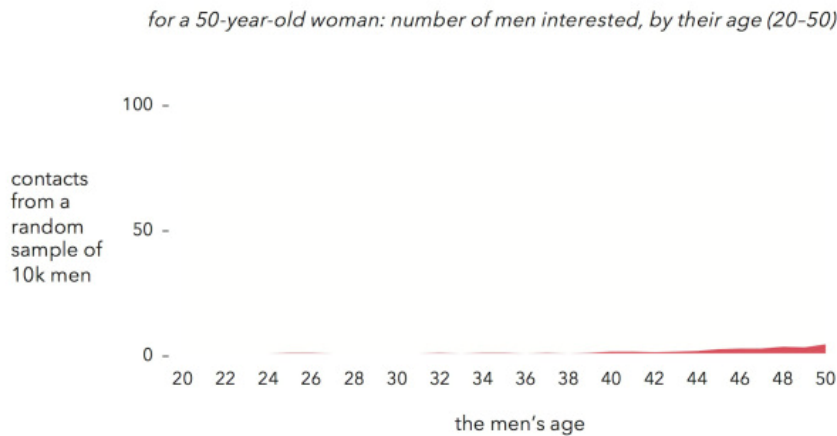
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Think about it like this: Imagine you could take a typical 20-year-old guy, who's just starting to date as an adult (definition: no SOLO beer cups present during at least one of courtship/consummation/breakup), and you could somehow note all the women who would be interested in him. If you could then track the whole lot over time, the main way he'll lose options from that set is when some of them just stop being single because they've paired off with someone else. In fact, his total "interested" pool would actually *gain* women, because as he gets older, and presumably richer and more successful, those qualities draw younger women in. In any event, his age, of itself, doesn't hurt him. Over the first two decades of his dating life, as he and the women in his pool mature, the ones who are still available will find him as desirable an option as they did when they were all 20.

If you could do the same thing for a typical woman at 20, you'd get a different story. Over the years, she, too, would lose men from her pool to things like marriage, but she would also lose options to time itself as the years passed: Fewer and fewer of the remaining single men would find her attractive. Her dating pool is like a can with two holes — it drains on the double.

The number of single men shrinks rapidly by age: According to the U.S. Census, there are 10-million single men ages 20 to 24, but only 5-million at 30 to 34, and just 3.5-million at 40 to 44. When you overlay the preference patterns we see above to those shrinking demographics, you can get a sense of how a woman's real options change over time.

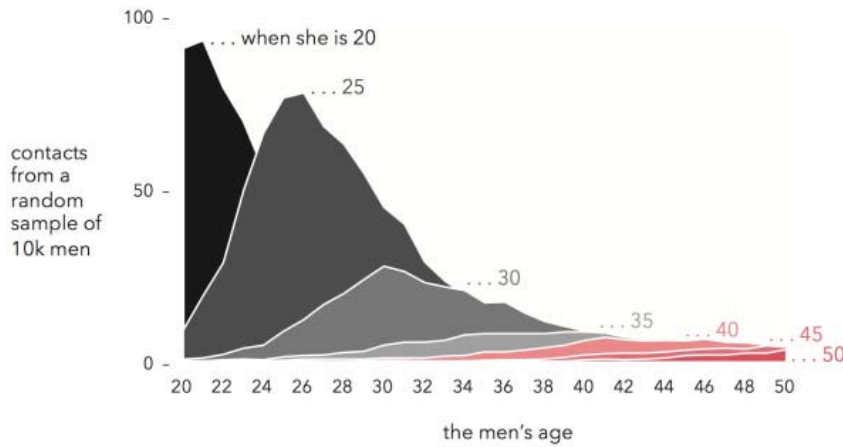for a 20-year-old woman: number of men interested, by their age (20-50)

For a woman at 20, the actual shape of the dating pool is pictured in Figure 7. Her peers (guys in their early twenties) form the biggest component, and the numbers slope off rapidly — 30-year-old men, for example, make up only a small part. They are less likely to actually contact someone so young, despite their privately expressed interest, and in addition many men already have partnered off by that age. By the time the woman is 50, the men left (and still interested), are presented on the same scale in Figure 8. It's Bridget Jones in charts.

for a 50-year-old woman: number of men interested, by their age (20-50)

Comparing the areas, for every 100 men interested in that 20-year-old, there are only nine looking for someone 30 years older. Figure 9 shows the full progression of charts, rendered from a woman's perspective for each of the ages 20 to 50.

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So often in my line of work I'll see two individuals, both alone but for whatever reason not connecting. In this case, for this facet of the experience, it's two whole groups of people searching for each other at cross-purposes. Women want men to age with them. And men always head toward youth. A 32-year-old woman will sign up with a dating site, set her age-preference filters at 28-35, and begin to browse. That 35-year-old man will come along, set his filters to 24-40, and yet rarely contact anyone over 29. Neither finds what they are looking for.

You could say they're like two ships passing in the night, but that's not quite right. The men do seem at sea, pulled to some receding horizon. But in my mind, I see the women still on solid ground, ashore, just watching them disappear.

National Post

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