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MICHEL MARTIN, host:

Now to another type of cyber-socializing: online dating. Love may be blind, but in the virtual world it is not colorblind. According to new data compiled by the free online dating service OKCupid, racial biases are very much part of the romantic choices we are making online, even when we insist that they are not. The site looked at the messaging behaviors of over a million users and found that black women were the most slighted, and white men and women were the most favored when it comes to seeking out a partner in cyberspace.

To talk more about this, we invited OKCupid co-founder and CEO Sam Yagan. Welcome. Thank you so much for joining us.

Mr. SAM YAGAN (Co-founder and Chief Executive Officer, OKCupid): Thank you so much for having me.

MARTIN: So you set up an algorithm to determine who was writing who back. Why did you want to know?

Mr. YAGAN: Well, we were intrigued by the fact that we had so much actual behavior among people on our dating site, OKCupid. There are so many surveys and so many people who have theories about, you know, what role race plays, but we all know that people respond differently when they're responding to a survey versus actually the behavior they exhibit in real life. So we realized that we had millions of interactions between people of all races and that we could begin to look at what factor race played in those interactions.

MARTIN: And what made it particularly interesting is that you asked people what they were looking for, and then you could determine whether their behavior matched what it is they said, which is one of the things that intrigued me. And I have to tell you, some of the findings will be fairly painful, depending on your values, for some people to discover.

You found that black women get the least response to their messages. They also respond the most to received messages. You found that Indian men fare very poorly overall but also with Indian women, that Indian women do well overall. White women and men do the best.

Now, I think one question people will have is: Does this reflect who's in the pool? For example, is it possible that white men and women do the best because there are just more of them in the pool?

Mr. YAGAN: Sure, that's a great question, and what we - we've surveyed - well, we didn't survey. We've observed so many million - so many people, over a million people on our site, and it turns out that the percentage of each ethnic group that we have matches fairly closely to that in the population. So we don't think that there's a skew based on the actual percentages in the population.

MARTIN: So what do you think is going on here?

Mr. YAGAN: Well, because we're able to adjust for compatibility, and what that means is we've already normalized for how well we think each person is going to get along with the other person, the only factor left in determining response rate really is the aesthetic appearance of the person who sent you that message. Obviously, there's more to aesthetic appearance than just race, but that is going to be the first thing that someone notices when they look at a picture. So we think that there really is racial bias in determining who people want to date.

MARTIN: You know, it's no secret that race is a factor in dating, you know, offline. For example, there's a big story right now making the rounds, particularly in cable, about a justice of the peace in Louisiana who refused to sign a marriage certificate for a biracial couple, saying he feared for their children. So it's no secret that people think this way, but why did you think, or did you think, that it would be different online? And I do want to emphasize again that you are matching people's behavior against their reported preferences. So there is a variance there. But why did you think it would be different online?

Mr. YAGAN: Perhaps we were too hopeful. We certainly hoped to find data that was going to, you know, show that we were, you know, that people were actually acting on their stated preferences and that their behaviors were similar to what they were stating, but one good example, we asked a question: Is interracial marriage a bad idea? And across the board, even, you know, among whites for example, 93 percent say no, seven percent say yes. But then when actually asked would you strongly prefer to date someone of your own skin color, white women, 54 percent, said yes, they strongly prefer, whereas across the board, every other ethnic group said no, that was not a priority for them.

MARTIN: So what response are you getting to this survey? As I said, this is - you know, some people will say yeah, so what? But other people will say ow, ouch. This is kind of painful stuff. What are people saying?

Mr. YAGAN: I think people are - people first tried to poke holes in the methodology of what we're observing, and the first knee-jerk reactions on our blog were largely around, well, here's, you know, why your conclusions are invalid. But I think, you know, as there's been more thoughtful debate about it, you know, maybe it's not that surprising after all that certain ethnic groups or racial groups are going to be treated differently and that the way we act is not necessarily reflective of what we say.

MARTIN: Sam Yagan is the co-founder and CEO of OKCupid. It's a free, online dating site. He joined us from Chicago, and if you want to know more about the study we're talking about, we'll have a link on our site. Just go to npr.org. Go to programs and click on TELL ME MORE. Sam, thank you.

Mr. YAGAN: Thank you so much.

(Soundbite of music)