

# Assessment of the Relationship Between the Use of Birth Control Pill and the Characteristics of Mate Selection

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction.** In recent research, scientists have begun to suspect that birth control pill use could interfere with key mechanisms that play a role when women choose a sexual partner. Many studies have shown that women, particularly during the most fertile days of their menstrual cycle, look for specific physical, psychological, and behavioral characteristics indicative of genetic quality in a short-term partner.

**Aims.** Analysis of the psychometric properties of the Partner's Masculinity Index (PMI) scale. The scale was built to assess the degree of masculinity in hypothetical short-term partners.

**Methods.** A total of 395 female Italian volunteers from Central Italy ( $M = 32.9$  years old,  $SD = 8.58$ , range = 18–50 years) completed the study. The psychometric properties of PMI were then evaluated.

**Main Outcome Measures.** We administered the following self-report questionnaires: (i) PMI; (ii) Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 Masculinity/Femininity scale; and (iii) Demographic Questionnaire.

**Results.** Exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis showed a four-factor structure for the PMI. Internal consistency of the measure, evaluated with the Cronbach's alpha, was satisfactory. Factorial ANOVA results showed that the group of nonpill users obtained higher scores on the PMI scale than the group of pill users (considering the fertile phase of the cycle).

**Conclusions.** From an evolutionary point of view, changes in preference for indicators of genetic quality in a sexual partner are considered to be functional and adaptive. Pill use may have implications for both current and future generations. Directions for future research are discussed. **Gori A, Giannini M, Craparo G, Caretti V, Nannini I, Madathil R, and Schuldberg D. Assessment of the relationship between the use of birth control pill and the characteristics of mate selection. J Sex Med 2014;11:2181–2187.**

**Key Words.** Partner's Masculinity Index; Birth Control Pill; Contraceptive Pill; Sexuality

## Introduction

The introduction of the contraceptive pill in the United States in 1960 by the FDA has made a substantial contribution to the emancipation of women who are now in a position to better pursue their personal life goals including education and career goals [1]. The availability of the pill has had an impact on many aspects of social life, including family roles, women's health, relations between men and women, as well as resulting con-

troversies and questions surrounding its use [2]. Today, the birth control pill is used by over 60 million women worldwide [3]. Therefore, questions and concerns related to the impact of pill use are very timely.

One area of exploration is the impact of pill use on mate selection. Previous research has shown that women using the pill do not appear to exhibit typical oestrus sexuality but instead display preferences and interests similar to those of women in the nonfertile phases [4]. One theory that has led

researchers to analyze changes in women's preferences for certain male characteristics across the reproductive cycle is the Good Genes Sexual Selection Theory [5]. This theory purports that when individuals differ in their heritable quality, people who mate with those who have greater heritable fitness should accrue advantage over those who do not.

When evaluating men as short-term mates, women in the fertile phase of cycle should seek male traits or characteristics that emphasize the quality of a man's heritable fitness. The logic underlying this prediction is that because women cannot benefit from a short-term mate's heritable fitness when they cannot conceive, they should devalue indicators of heritable fitness as genetic benefits cannot be gained [6]. Research has demonstrated cycle-related shifts in preferences for indicators of male heritable fitness, as well as theoretically expected interactions with mating context [7]. Women tend to find these features most appealing when they evaluate potential short-term mates and they are ovulating in comparison with other contexts.

In women, the phase of the menstrual cycle is linked to changes in preferences for indicators of genetic quality provided by men. During the past decade, more than 75% of the studies investigating women's cycling mate preferences have demonstrated that women seek specific characters when fertility is maximal [4]. Studies have shown that women who are ovulating prefer more stereotypically masculine features (i.e., tall, broad-shouldered), exhibition of dominance, and competitiveness, as well as high intelligence [5,7–9]. It is interesting to think about whether the increase in preference for certain attributes remains unchanged in pill users as it prevents ovulation and normal fertility. New evidence suggests that the pill, by eliminating oestrus, changes the natural preferences in women for markers of both genetic quality and compatibility in mates, as well as natural cycling attractiveness to men [4]. As compared with normally cycling women, pill users show little to no preferences for facial [10] and vocal masculinity [11,12]. For example, the preferred face shape is more masculine during the high conception-probability phase of the menstrual cycle in nonpill users, but pill users do not show similar preference [12].

The objective of the current study is to investigate whether the contraceptive pill, leading to prevention of ovulation, may lead pill users to prefer a seek partners with less masculine physical, psycho-

logical, and behavioral features than nonpill users, especially when they have to judge a sexual partner during high fertility (i.e., between 11th and 21st day of the cycle).

### Aims

1. Analysis of the psychometric properties of the Partner's Masculinity Index (PMI) scale. The scale was built to assess the degree of masculinity in hypothetical short-term partners. This measure consists of 20 items that ask the participants to rate their degree of preference for certain traits on a five-point Likert-type scale. Example of traits include shoulder width, athleticism, and social class. Procedures of analysis of the psychometric properties partially followed those of previous studies [13–15].
2. Estimation of systematic covariation between the PMI and the Masculinity/Femininity Scale (Mf) of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 (MMPI-2) [16], a scale on gender identity composed of 56 items that assesses stereotypical masculine or feminine interests/behaviors. Women with high scores in this scale are generally less traditionally oriented toward a feminine role, have interests that tend to be stereotypically more masculine than feminine, are outgoing, and are self-confident.
3. Examination of the scores obtained on the PMI among pill users and nonpill users considering ovulatory cycle phase.

### Methods

#### *Participants and Procedure*

Participants ( $N = 395$ ) were women (accidental sample) from Central Italy ranging from 18 to 50 years old ( $M = 32.9$ ,  $SD = 8.58$ ). With respect to the level of education, the 32% of subjects owns a high school diploma, the 45% of participants has a bachelor's degree, the 17% of subjects owns a master's degree, and the 6% has a middle school diploma. With regard to the relationship status, the 22.1% of participants declared to be single, the 51.3% declared to be engaged, the 22.6% to be married, and the 4.1% declared others types of relationships.

The sample was divided into two groups: (i) a group of 200 women ( $M = 33.4$ ,  $SD = 9.12$ ) who completed the questionnaire in order to verify the factor structure of the PMI and (ii) a group of 195 women ( $M = 32$ ,  $SD = 7.98$ ) who completed the

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