

Research Report

Fickle men, faithful women: Effects of mating cues on men's and women's variety-seeking behavior in consumption

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Abstract

Attitudes about commitment can affect consumers' variety-seeking behavior. In the mating domain, short-term mating cues tend to activate an uncommitment mind-set in men and lead them to seek greater variety in romantic relationships; whereas long-term mating cues tend to activate a commitment mind-set in women and lead them to seek less variety. In this research, we explore whether short-term and long-term mating cues can likewise affect variety-seeking behavior in the product consumption domain through their influence on commitment attitude. In three experiments, we demonstrate that men's variety-seeking behavior increases in the presence of short-term but not long-term mating cues; conversely, women's variety-seeking behavior decreases in the presence of long-term but not short-term mating cues. These effects are caused by attitude toward commitment induced by mating cues. Past research concerning this topic has focused on one gender and on short-term mating cues only, but in this paper we provide a more complete picture—and a more coherent theory—of how, via influencing commitment attitude, mating cues affect variety-seeking behavior differently in men than in women.

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Introduction

The mating motive, which is probably the most basic and powerful motive in humans and, indeed, in all living creatures, has fundamental effects on human behaviors. It motivates people to

engage in a diverse range of activities that signal mating value (Miller, 1999; Roney, 2003; Trivers, 1972). Examples of such behavior include choosing conspicuous products, generating creative artworks, wearing sexy dresses and getting tanned, giving gifts to romantic partners, displaying heroism or dominance, saving less but borrowing more, and becoming more aggressive to perceived offenders (Durante, Griskevicius, Hill, Perilloux, & Li, 2011; Griskevicius, Cialdini, & Kenrick, 2006; Griskevicius, Tybur, Ackerman, Delton, & Robertson, 2012; Griskevicius et al., 2007; Griskevicius et al., 2009; Saad & Gill, 2003; Saad & Peng, 2006; Sundie et al., 2011).

The effects of mating motives are not restricted to sex-signaling behaviors. For instance, short-term mating cues have been found to activate the general reward circuitry, which induces craving and impatience for food or monetary reward (Festjens, Bruyneel, & Dewitte, 2014; Kim & Zauberman, 2013; Van den Bergh, Dewitte, & Warlop, 2008; Wilson & Daly, 2004). Mating

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motives have been also found to activate a general sensitivity to indicators of growth and decay associated with determining mating value in human courtship, which increases people's preferences for ripe fruits and newly blossomed flowers (Huang & Bargh, 2008). Our paper examines whether the effects of mating cues on individuals' commitment to romantic relationships can carry over to their commitment to product choices—in particular, whether the effects carry over to their variety-seeking behavior in product choices. We demonstrate that, compared with the baseline case where no mating motives are activated, men's variety-seeking behavior is increased by short-term mating cues but not by long-term cues; in contrast, women's variety-seeking behavior is decreased by long-term mating cues but not by short-term cues. We further demonstrate that these effects are caused by a (un)commitment mind-set induced by mating cues.

The mating preferences and decisions are hypothesized to be strategic products of selection pressures (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Kenrick, Groth, Trost, & Sadalla, 1993; Trivers, 1972). Because women invest more in offspring than do men (Trivers, 1972), females have evolved preferences for stable, long-term relationships in order to gain economic resources and protection for offspring; yet men have evolved a powerful desire for short-term sexual access to a large number of women, presumably to maximize the chances of reproduction (Bailey, Gaulin, Agyei, & Gladue, 1994; Saad, Eba, & Sejean, 2009; Symons, 1979). The finding that mammalian males have a strong urge toward seeking variety in their sexual partners has a term called “the Coolidge effect” (Bermant, 1976).

These gender differences in preference for short- versus long-term mates tend to drive the different responses of men and women to mating cues. For example, short-term mating motives have been found to increase men's willingness to pay for conspicuous products because such products can enhance men's desirability as a short-term mate, but neither short-term nor long-term mating motives induce females to consume conspicuously because doing so is not instrumental in signaling a woman's quality as a mate (Sundie et al., 2011). Similarly, men showed greater sensitivity to women's attractive face and women showed greater sensitivity to men's earning potential and ambition, and this difference was more pronounced in evaluations of short-term mates than in evaluations of long-term mates (Saad & Gill, 2014).

More relevant to our research, many studies show that men and women behave differently in the extent to which they commit to romantic relationships. Men are more likely to be interested in uncommitted sex (Bailey et al., 1994; Buss & Schmitt, 1993), and short-term mating cues tend to make men feel more uncommitted (Hirsch & Paul, 1996). In contrast, women are more likely to be faithful (Cashdan, 1996) and are less willing to have sex without commitment and emotional closeness (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). Short-term mating cues therefore tend not to activate the uncommitment mind-set in women (Jedlteska, 1975; Schmitt, 2005). On the other hand, because women generally seek long-term relationships, they tend to feel more committed when a long-term mating motive is activated than when no mating motive is activated (Landolt, Lalumière, & Quinsey, 1995). Yet men tend not to become particularly committed when encountering long-term mating cues (Jedlteska, 1975).

The effects of mating motives can carry over to sex-unrelated tasks. For instance, priming short-term mating cues typically triggers thoughts about the present and leads to a local, detail-oriented processing style when people work on sex-unrelated tasks, whereas priming long-term mating cues typically triggers thoughts about the distant future and leads to a global, holistic processing style (Förster, Epstude, & Özelsel, 2009). We therefore hypothesize that the effect of mating cues on individuals' commitment to romantic relationships also carries over to their commitment to product choices, namely, the extent to which they seek variety in those choices.

Commitment tendency leads to consistent preferences and behaviors, and uncommitment tendency leads to unstable preferences (Crosby & Taylor, 1983; Robertson, 1976). Feeling uncommitted in a romantic relationship usually drives individuals to seek alternative mates, whereas feeling committed tends to help individuals to maintain romantic relationships by inhibiting their tendency to switch partners (Gonzaga, Haselton, Smurdab, Davies, & Pooreb, 2008; Johnson & Rusbult, 1989). Likewise, activating concepts that are related to loyalty and commitment has been shown to decrease variety-seeking behavior in consumption choices (Fishbach, Ratner, & Zhang, 2011). Because short-term mating cues tend to activate an uncommitment mind-set in men, we expect short-term cues to increase men's variety-seeking behavior in sex-unrelated consumption. At the same time, because long-term mating cues tend to activate a commitment mind-set in women, we expect long-term cues to decrease women's variety-seeking behavior in sex-unrelated consumption. We tested our predictions in three experiments.

Experiment 1: Potato chips

Experiment 1 examines whether short-term and long-term mating cues affect men and women's variety-seeking behavior differently.

Method

We hired one man and one woman as our experimenters. Each of the two experimenters approached same-gender prospective participants in a university library. Participants ($N = 185$, 95 women, $M_{\text{age}} = 21.8$) were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions (mating cue: control vs. short-term vs. long-term). We used participant gender as a natural between-participants variable.

The mating cue manipulation was adapted from Griskevicius et al. (2006). Participants in the short-term cue condition read a passage about a romantic encounter with someone of the opposite gender on the last day of a trip to a coastal city. The passage described the pair chatting at a romantic coffee house and sharing a candlelit dinner, followed by a walk along the seashore during which the date hinted at being attracted to the participant. In contrast, those in the long-term cue condition read a passage describing the participant falling in love with someone of the opposite gender during summer internship at a coastal city, spending time with that person reading, shopping, and seeing each other's friends and family members after returning home,

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