

Research Report

What a feeling! Touching sexually laden stimuli makes women seek rewards ☆

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Received 25 October 2012; received in revised form 12 September 2013; accepted 2 October 2013

Available online 10 October 2013

Abstract

We argue that women's previously documented unresponsiveness to sexual primes when making economic decisions may be a consequence of the specific types of primes that have been used (i.e., visual primes). In three studies we show that presenting women with tactile sexual cues does influence their decisions about economic rewards. Similar to the effect found in men, the first study demonstrates that touching a pair of boxer shorts leads to a craving for monetary rewards in women. In the second study it is shown that touching a pair of boxers makes women less loss averse for both money and food. The third study explicitly focuses on the relative effectiveness of tactile versus visual sexual cues in altering women's economic decisions, and reveals that women's willingness-to-pay for economic rewards increases only when the sexual cue is tactile. We suggest that touching (vs. seeing) sexually laden stimuli prompts pre-programmed consummatory Pavlovian responses that promote approaching economic rewards.

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Keywords: Economic decision-making; Female consumers; Sexual primes; Touch

Introduction

Previous literature seems to have established that women's economic decision making, contrary to men's, is virtually insensitive to the presence of sexual cues. For instance, while men are more impatient for monetary rewards (Wilson & Daly, 2003), take more financial risk (Baker & Maner, 2008), attach higher importance to material goods (Roney, 2003) and spend more on conspicuous consumer goods (Griskevicius et al., 2007) when visually exposed to a sexually attractive member of the

opposite sex, the same studies show that women's economic decision making remains unaffected after having been primed with potential mates. Such findings may have discouraged authors to include women when studying the influence of sexual cues on economic decision making (Knutson, Wimmer, Kuhnen, & Winkielman, 2008). For instance, Van den Bergh, Dewitte, and Warlop (2008) demonstrated that exposure to sexual cues leads to a monetary craving in men. They did not study women. In the present paper, we argue that the specificity of the sexual primes used so far (i.e., visual sexual primes) may have caused women's unresponsiveness to sexual cues when engaging in economic decision-making. Specifically, we will show that women are susceptible to tactile sexual primes, resulting in altered economic decisions.

The structure of the article is as follows. First, we review literature suggesting that tactile sexual cues may be highly efficient to induce a sexual motivation (in women). Second, we present three studies conducted to test our prediction. In the conclusion we provide more insight in why tactile sexual cues produce effects on women's economic decision-making.

☆ We thank the Consumer Behavior group at the KU Leuven for helpful and valuable comments on a previous version of this paper.

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¹ The first author is supported by a Ph. D. fellowship of the Research Foundation—Flanders (FWO).

² The second and third authors are supported by grant G.0472.09N from the Research Foundation—Flanders (FWO).

The impact of tactile sexual cues on decision making

Literature supports the idea that touch is highly effective in influencing decision making. The experience of being touched influences many decisions and preferences, such as the willingness to participate in mall interviews (Hornik & Ellis, 1988), the amount of gratuity given in a restaurant (Crusco & Wetzel, 1984), or the evaluation of the service in a library (Fisher, Rytting, & Heslin, 1976).

Actively touching objects or stimuli seems to influence preferences and decisions as well (Peck & Childers, 2003). For instance, Peck and Wiggins (2006) found that adding a touch element (e.g., a sample of fabric) on a pamphlet requesting donations to a charity organization increased the impact of the message as measured by the time and money people wanted to spend on the organization. Peck and Shu (2009) showed that the endowment effect (i.e., mere ownership of an object increases its valuation; Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1990) also occurred by merely touching—rather than actually possessing—a product. These findings were explained by the suggestion that touch facilitates a person's affective reaction towards a stimulus (Peck & Shu, 2009; Peck & Wiggins, 2006). That is, the affective meaning of a message or a product seems to be transmitted efficiently when it is touched. This emotional efficiency is consistent with the idea that touch and taste (vs. smell, sight, and hearing) are highly efficient transmitters of the reward (or punishment) potential of a stimulus because no intermediating layers (such as photons or atmospheric media) are required to transmit stimuli characteristics (Rolls & Deco, 2010). It is also consistent with the finding that close proximity to appetitive stimuli (which is higher in the case of tactile or gustatory stimuli than in the case of visual, auditory or olfactory stimuli) elicits reward seeking responses (Loewenstein, 1996). For instance, Bushong, King, Camerer, and Rangel (2010) found that varying the perceived proximity of an item (i.e., item put behind barrier of Plexiglas or not) affected the motivation to acquire it. In sum, touch seems to be an efficient means for transferring affective qualities of stimuli, and in this way to affect decision making.

We hypothesize that touching affectively laden cues, namely male underwear, will be especially effective to introduce a sexual need in female consumers, such that women's economic decisions will be affected in an analogous way as men's economic decisions are affected by visual sexual cues (e.g., Van den Bergh et al., 2008). Derived from previously observed effects of sex cues on economic decision making in men, we predict that touching sexually laden stimuli will lead women to have a higher craving for monetary rewards (Study 1), a lower level of monetary loss aversion (Study 2), and a higher willingness-to-pay (WTP) for rewarding products (Study 3) as compared to touching unrewarding stimuli (all studies) or merely seeing sexually laden stimuli (Study 3).

The present studies

In three studies we investigate whether women's economic decision-making is changed after they have touched sexually

laden stimuli. In all three studies, women were asked to rate either a pair of boxer shorts (i.e., tactile sex cue condition) or a t-shirt (i.e., control condition) on eight dimensions (e.g., "The fabric is pleasant to touch"). Importantly, the stimuli were physically present for participants to touch while rating them and the fabric (i.e., cotton) was kept constant for both clothing items. We added a visual sex cue control condition in study 3. The sexual prime we used is an adapted version of Van den Bergh et al. (2008, study 2) who asked men to evaluate either bras or t-shirts. Participants engaged in economic decision-making in the second phase of each study.

In the first study, we test whether touching a pair of boxer shorts (rather than a t-shirt) heightens women's preference for smaller, but immediate monetary rewards (for similar findings in men, see Van den Bergh et al., 2008). In the second study, we investigate the breadth of this sexual priming effect in women. First, we investigate whether touching sexual stimuli decreases women's loss aversion, building on the idea that loss aversion is partly determined by a desire for gains (for similar findings in men, see Li, Kenrick, Griskevicius, & Neuberg, 2012). Second, we investigate whether exposure to tactile sexual cues also affects decisions about other economic resources such as food. This would be in line with findings that sexual primes cause men to alter food-related decisions (Van den Bergh et al., 2008). In the third study, we investigate whether touching a pair of boxer shorts rather than seeing them behind Plexiglas (Bushong et al., 2010) increases women's WTP for rewarding products. We added a visual sex cue condition to demonstrate that women do respond stronger to tactile than to visual sex cues. In addition, we included men to replicate previous findings that men change their economic decisions in response to visual sexual cues, and to explore to what extent men react to tactile sexual cues as well.

Study 1

The goal of the first study is to show that touching sexually laden stimuli leads to heightened impatience for monetary rewards in female consumers.

Participants

Participants were 42 female students, and their ages ranged from 19 to 26 years ($M = 21$, $SD = 1.76$). All students participated in return for a participation fee.

Method and materials

Participants came to the laboratory in groups of six persons and were assigned a seat in a partially enclosed cubicle where they completed the study in private on a personal computer. As a cover story for our manipulation, we asked respondents to help a major clothing store identify factors determining the attractiveness of several clothing items. To that purpose, they had to rate either a t-shirt (i.e., "control condition") or a pair of boxer shorts (i.e., "sex cue condition") on several aspects (such as touch, quality of fabrics, ...). The clothing material was

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