



# Do women perform fellatio as a mate retention behavior?



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## ABSTRACT

Men who report performing more mate retention behaviors, in general, and more benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors, in particular, also report greater interest in, and spend more time, performing oral sex on their female partner. We extended these findings to a female sample to investigate whether women's oral sex behaviors are related to their mate retention behaviors. We secured self-report data from 410 women residing in the United States or in Germany in a committed, sexual, heterosexual relationship. The results indicate that women who report performing more benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors also report greater interest in, and spend more time, performing oral sex on their partner. Further, there are no sex differences in the magnitudes or directions of these relationships. The results suggest that both men and women are more interested in, and spend more time, performing oral sex on their partner as part of a benefit-provisioning strategy to increase their partner's relationship satisfaction. We address limitations of this research, and discuss explanations for the results.

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## 1. Introduction

Male infidelity has been documented in dozens of cultures worldwide, and some published samples estimate that as many as 50% of men have committed infidelity at least once in their lifetime (Allen & Baucom, 2006; Buss, 1994; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953; Schmitt, 2003; Wiederman & Hurd, 1999). Women who suspect or discover their partner's infidelity may subsequently suffer from physical and psychological problems, including major depression, anxiety, and relationship dissatisfaction (Betzig, 1989; Cano & O'Leary, 2000).

### 1.1. Mate retention behaviors

Women perform "mate retention" behaviors to reduce the risk of their partner's infidelity (Buss, 1988; Buss & Shackelford, 1997). Buss (1988) identified 104 acts clustered into 19 mate retention "tactics" (see Table 1). Buss organized these tactics into five "categories": Direct Guarding, Intersexual Negative Inducements, Intrasexual Negative Inducements, Positive Inducements, and Public Signals of Possession. Direct Guarding includes behaviors such as vigilance about one's partner's whereabouts and concealment of one's partner (e.g., "I stayed close to my partner while we were at a party"). Intersexual Negative Inducements include

behaviors that manipulate and derogate one's partner (e.g., "I pleaded that I could not live without my partner"). Intrasexual Negative Inducements include behaviors intended to deter same-sex rivals from pursuing one's partner (e.g., "I told others my partner was stupid"). Positive Inducements include behaviors that increase the appeal of the current relationship to one's partner (e.g., "I bought my partner an expensive gift"). Public Signals of Possession include behaviors that display to others that one's relationship is exclusive and committed (e.g., "I kissed my partner when others of my same sex were around").

Miner, Starratt, and Shackelford (2009) grouped the five categories into two superordinate "domains": cost-inflicting mate retention (which includes the categories Direct Guarding, Intersexual Negative Inducements, and Intrasexual Negative Inducements) and benefit-provisioning mate retention (which includes the categories Positive Inducements and Public Signals of Possession). Cost-inflicting behaviors reduce the risk of partner infidelity by lowering one's partner's self-esteem, thereby causing the partner to feel unworthy of the current relationship or any other potential relationship (Miner et al., 2009). Benefit-provisioning behaviors reduce the risk of partner infidelity by increasing one's partner's relationship satisfaction (Miner et al., 2009).

### 1.2. Oral sex

Oral sex is a common sexual activity (e.g., Santtila et al., 2008) that is positively associated with sexual satisfaction (Brody & Costa, 2009) and relationship satisfaction (Ashdown, Hackathorn,

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& Clark, 2011; cf. Brody & Costa, 2009). Men are equally likely to report their female partner performing oral sex on them (i.e., *fellatio*) and performing oral sex on their female partner (i.e., *cunnilingus*) at their most recent sexual encounter as women are to report performing *fellatio* and receiving *cunnilingus* (Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2012; cf. de Visser, Smith, Rissel, Richters, & Grulich, 2003). Most men and women report experiencing oral sex at least once in their life (de Visser et al., 2003), and both desire to experience oral sex (Santtila et al., 2008). Santtila and colleagues (2008) documented that men (relative to women) desired oral sex more often, and that men's (but not women's) relationship satisfaction was positively correlated with their actual frequency of experiencing oral sex (although the researchers did not distinguish between *fellatio* and *cunnilingus*). Notably, women (but not men) are more likely to experience orgasm during a sexual encounter if they also receive oral sex than when not receiving oral sex (Richters, de Visser, Rissel, & Smith, 2006).

### 1.3. Oral sex and mate retention

Previous research has documented a sex difference between risk of partner's infidelity and oral sex behaviors. Men (but not women) at greater risk of their partner's infidelity expressed greater interest in, and spent more time, performing oral sex on their partner (Pham & Shackelford, 2013a; Pham, Shackelford, & Sela, 2013).

Pham and Shackelford (2013b) documented that men who report performing more mate retention behaviors, in general, and more benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors, in particular, also report greater interest in, and spent more time, performing *cunnilingus* on their partner. Further, men who report performing more cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors also reported less interest in performing *cunnilingus* on their partner, and this is consistent with research documenting a negative relationship between the frequency with which men perform benefit-provisioning behaviors and cost-inflicting behaviors (Miner et al., 2009).

Mate retention behaviors are sex-differentiated for some categories but not others: Men (compared to women) more frequently

display resources and threaten same-sex rivals, whereas women (compared to men) more frequently enhance their appearance and punish their partner's infidelity threat (Buss, 1988; Buss & Shackelford, 1997). Because Pham and Shackelford (2013b) found no associations between men's oral sex behavior and these tactics (i.e., resource display, intrasexual threats, appearance enhancement, infidelity threat punishment), it is unclear how these sex differences in mate retention tactics may play out with regard to sex differences in oral sex behaviors (i.e., women performing *fellatio* on their partner).

Thus, men and women differ on *some* aspects of mate retention and of oral sex behaviors. Pham and Shackelford (2013b) documented a relationship between men's mate retention behaviors and their performance of *cunnilingus*. The current research explores the relationship between women's mate retention behaviors and their performance of *fellatio*. We conducted an exploratory test of whether women's mate retention behaviors correlate with their interest in (Hypothesis 1), and time spent (Hypothesis 2), performing *fellatio* on their partner; and specifically, whether women's benefit provisioning mate retention behaviors correlate with their interest in (Hypothesis 3), and time spent (Hypothesis 4), performing *fellatio*. Finally, we investigated whether there are sex differences in the relationships between mate retention behaviors and interest in (Hypothesis 5), and time spent (Hypothesis 6), performing oral sex by statistically comparing our results with those of Pham and Shackelford (2013b).

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

We recruited convenience samples of 410 women, each in a committed, sexual, heterosexual relationship from universities and surrounding communities. We excluded data from 13 participants that scored more than three standard deviations from the mean for at least one target variable, leaving a sample size of 397 women. The mean participant age was 21.9 years ( $SD = 5.5$ ) and the mean relationship length was 29.2 months ( $SD = 35.7$ ).

**Table 1**  
Zero-order correlations between target variables.

Mate retention tactics	Oral sex variables					
	Interest in performing oral sex			Duration of oral sex		
	Current study	P & S	z	Current study	P & S	z
Vigilance	-.03	.00	–	.01	.00	–
Concealment of mate	-.03	-.02	–	.00	.04	–
Monopolize mate's time	-.01	.03	–	-.06	-.02	–
Threaten infidelity	.01	-.10	–	.00	.00	–
Punish mate's threat to infidelity	-.06	-.01	–	.00	.08	–
Emotional manipulation	.10*	.08	.29	.05	.03	–
Commitment manipulation	.00	.12*	–1.60	.10	.15**	-.76
Derogation of competitors	.00	.10	–	-.04	.05	–
Resource display	.01	.11*	–1.43	.08	.14**	-.88
Sexual inducements	.06	.12*	-.80	.02	.12*	–1.34
Enhance physical appearance	.03	.08	–	.09	.11*	-.23
Expressions of love and caring	.15**	.20**	-.65	.16**	.08	1.12
Submission and debasement	.00	.10	–	.08	.08	–
Verbal signals of possession	.20**	.24**	-.64	.14**	.14**	.00
Physical signals of possession	.10*	.22**	–1.65	.11*	.12*	-.14
Possessive ornamentation	.06	.18**	–1.70	.05	.10	–
Derogation of mate to competitors	-.07	-.04	–	-.08	-.02	–
Intrasexual threats	.00	.11*	–1.51	.05	.11*	-.77
Violence	.00	.05	–	-.03	.10	–

Note: P & S = Pham and Shackelford (2013b),  $n = 351$ .  $z$  = Fisher's  $r$ -to- $z$  transformation, comparing correlations from Pham and Shackelford (2013b) and from the current research.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

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