



# What do women want? An interactionist account of women's mate preferences

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## ABSTRACT

We investigated the moderating influence of individual differences in women's sociosexuality on romantic preferences within three specific relationship contexts. Female participants were presented with four prospective mates, varying in their ambition and attractiveness, and were asked to rate interest in these targets as short-term sexual partners, as casual dating partners, and as long-term romantic partners. Short-term sexual appeal largely rested on targets' attractiveness, particularly among women with an unrestricted sociosexual orientation. Dating appeal was dependent on attractiveness, particularly among unrestricted women, and on ambition. Ambition and attractiveness synergistically influenced targets' long-term desirability, and these preferences were not moderated by women's sociosexual orientation. These findings portray the textured manner in which sociosexual orientation shapes women's mate preferences and underscore the need to delineate different types of short-term relationships. We advance an interactionist framework that considers how women's dispositions and the traits of potential mates jointly operate to influence romantic preferences within distinct contexts.

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## 1. Introduction

The great question that has never been answered, and which I have not yet been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is "What does a woman want?" (Sigmund Freud, cited in Jones, 1957)

Although Sigmund Freud alleged to comprehend the unconscious desires of his patients, his letter to Marie Bonaparte confesses confusion in a more material realm: the romantic desires of women. The present research adopts an interactionist framework to shed light on Freud's question – exploring how women's mate preferences within various contexts are jointly influenced by their predispositions and the traits of prospective suitors. We assess the moderating effect of sociosexuality – a dispositional proclivity for long-term romantic commitment versus short-term sexual liaisons – on preferences for male traits within different relationship contexts. That is, we ask, does sociosexuality moderate partner preferences in some romantic contexts but not in others? In addition, we move beyond the typical long-term versus short-term dichotomy by examining women's preferences in an intermediate and exceedingly common context: casual dating. Casual dating, which we define as an informal process involving two parties assessing the feasibility of sustained romantic interest,

warrants increased attention. This context allows women to assess long-term romantic potential, but as it does not imply formal commitment, sexual involvement carries great risk.

To inform our predictions, we draw from three closely related theoretical perspectives – Parental Investment Theory (PIT, Trivers, 1972), Sexual Strategies Theory (SST, Buss & Schmitt, 1993), and Strategic Pluralism Theory (SPT, Gangestad & Simpson, 2000) – each making specific predictions regarding what women want, and when. We also assess past research exploring women's changing mate preferences across different contexts, highlighting how the present study borrows from and builds upon the foundation provided by those findings, and review the sociosexuality construct.

### 1.1. Theories of mating strategies

Trivers' (1972) PIT asserts that sex differences in the effort contributed to producing and nurturing offspring result in the sexes adopting divergent mating strategies. Among humans, men and women differ in their minimum obligatory investment, as women incur the costs of internal fertilization, placentation, gestation, and lactation. Being less invested, men can engage in multiple mating opportunities over the time course required for women to bear just one child. Women are thus discriminating, seeking committed partners possessing traits that signal the capacity and willingness to invest in family. PIT is typically invoked to describe women's preferences for long-term partners.

Buss and Schmitt's (1993) SST largely aligns with PIT in suggesting that men, relative to women, are more motivated to pursue

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short-term mating opportunities and women, relative to men, are more motivated to pursue long-term mating opportunities. SST elaborates on Trivers' (1972) notion of mixed mating strategies by acknowledging that women sometimes pursue a short-term mating strategy if the benefits of doing so outweigh the costs. Benefits afforded to women by short-term mating include sexual relations with a partner of high genetic quality, switching to a new partner, acquiring immediate resources, and evaluating short-term mates as long-term partners. Most of these hypothesized benefits imply that SST construes women's short-term relationships as forums for sizing up prospective long-term partners (Simpson, Wilson, & Winterheld, 2004). Thus, SST is well-suited to elucidate both women's long-term preferences and their preferences for what might best be characterized as casual dating partners.

Gangestad and Simpson's (2000) SPT builds upon PIT and SST by articulating two broad classes of benefits offered by men to their female partners: (a) being a "good provider" (e.g., the ability and willingness to invest in family), or (b) having "good genes," which enhance offspring fitness either through increased viability or mating ability. Several putative markers of good genes have been identified, including facial attractiveness (Gangestad, Thornhill, & Yeo, 1994). In line with PIT and SST, SPT suggests that women seeking long-term commitments should be attuned to good provider cues; SPT further deduces that under certain situations, women seek casual sexual involvements to confer good genes onto resultant children. SPT thus makes similar predictions to those derived from PIT and SST regarding women's long-term partner preferences, but appears particularly useful for describing women's preferences for short-term sexual partners.

### 1.2. Women's mate preferences across relationship contexts

Prior research concludes that women are attuned to physical attractiveness in short-term sexual partners and desire indicators of ability and willingness to provide resources in long-term partners (e.g., Fletcher, Tither, O'Loughlin, Friesen, & Overall, 2004; Li & Kenrick, 2006; Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002). These lines of research have forced women to make tradeoffs when considering their ideal short-term or long-term partner and are thus mute on whether certain traits interact to influence mate choice within a given relationship context. For example, these research programs conclude that women seek conferral of resources from a long-term partner, but might his appeal be enhanced further if he is physically attractive, or does attractiveness provide diminishing returns, given sufficient "good provider" qualities?

In addition, most past research dichotomizes women's mating decisions into short-term versus long-term decisions, without examining intermediate contexts (cf. Fletcher, Tither, O'Loughlin, Friesen, & Overall, 2004). One noteworthy exception is research of Kenrick and colleagues (Kenrick, Groth, Trost, & Sadalla, 1993; Kenrick, Sadalla, Groth, & Trost, 1990) in which participants indicated their minimum standards for first dates, casual sex partners, and committed relationship partners. Women exhibited exacting standards for most traits when considering long-term relationship partners and casual sex partners, with physical attractiveness being paramount in short-term decisions. Kenrick et al. placed emphasis on the relative importance of traits across contexts; we examine the independent and interactive influence of traits within each context separately.

Townsend and colleagues (Townsend & Levy, 1990a, 1990b; Townsend & Roberts, 1993) also examined mate preferences within diverse romantic contexts, manipulating attractiveness cues and status cues to determine how these traits impact individuals' preferences. Regarding women's mate preferences, Townsend et al.'s chief conclusion is that status is the primary determinant of a man's acceptability for all types of relationships, and that convey-

ing cues of high status can compensate for low attractiveness. These conclusions are consistent with evolutionary theories of mating, which maintain that women are attuned to a man's status for long-term mating decisions, and with SST, which implies that short-term relationships can allow for assessment of a man's long-term potential. Townsend et al.'s findings, however, appear at odds with SPT, which highlights the importance of physical cues as good genes indicators in short-term sexual decisions. The ambiguity of Townsend et al.'s item assessing women's sexual interest, which leaves unspecified whether sex with the target is part of a deeper relationship, might account for this disparity. The present study makes more concrete to participants the fleeting nature of casual sexual liaisons.

The current study combines the strengths of prior research, and assesses the effects of sociosexuality, to gauge the nature of women's mate preferences within various relationship contexts. We clearly demarcate short-term sexual liaisons from casual dating relationships, and like Townsend and colleagues (Townsend & Levy, 1990a, 1990b; Townsend & Roberts, 1993), we vividly manipulate ambition and attractiveness within-subjects to assess the joint influence of these traits on women's mate preferences. In short, the methodology of the present study redresses existing limitations and examines whether sociosexuality moderates preferences in some contexts, but not in others.

### 1.3. Sociosexuality

Within-sex variation in preferred mating strategy greatly exceeds between-sex variation and part of this variation is captured by individual differences in sociosexuality (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). Individuals with a more restricted sociosexual orientation require more time in relationships before having sex with partners and are less likely to enjoy casual, uncommitted sex. Unrestricted individuals require less time in relationships before having sex, and are more comfortable engaging in sex without love or commitment. Preferred level of sexual activity does not vary between restricted and unrestricted individuals, but restricted individuals confine their sexual activity to committed relationships. The degree to which individuals adopt an unrestricted versus a restricted orientation is thought to vary as a function of one's own attributes and the demands posed by one's environment. Thus, although most women might ultimately desire the long-term care afforded by committed relationships, some women might shift their mating effort toward an unrestricted orientation, depending on individual and environmental conditions (see Simpson et al. (2004), for a review).

Women who direct their mating efforts toward casual sexual relations should be particularly attuned to good genes cues (e.g., physical attractiveness), given the uncertain commitment that such relations entail (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). Thus, unrestricted women should limit such relations to physically attractive partners. Unrestricted women's casual date preferences should also be swayed by attractiveness, as their dating relationships often involve sexual activity in the absence of long-term commitment. Restricted women are thought to simply avoid casual sexual relations, regardless of a prospective mate's physical attractiveness, as they focus their efforts on seeking romantically committed partners. Research has yet to ascertain whether sociosexuality moderates long-term preferences; these preferences, however, should be relatively stable across the continuum of sociosexuality, as long-term commitments are less risky to women. Restricted and unrestricted women favor entering monogamous relationships (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991) and are attentive to cues of partners' long-term investment (Townsend, 1995). Both restricted and unrestricted women, therefore, should seek prospective long-term partners displaying an ability and willingness to commit resources.

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