

### Original Article

## What Do Women's Advertised Mate Preferences Reveal? An Analysis of Video Dating Profiles

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**Abstract:** This study examined women's video dating profiles to determine what their advertised mate preferences revealed about their mate value and relationship interests. Women created a one-minute long video dating profile for a hypothetical dating website. The videos were content analyzed into four categories of stated mate preferences: 1) "good genes" indicators 2) good resource investment potential indicators 3) good parenting indicators and 4) good partner indicators. Long-term mating interest was positively correlated with describing good partner indicators and self-perceived mate value was positively correlated with describing good genes indicators. Short-term mating interest was negatively correlated with describing any mate preferences while attractiveness was positively correlated with doing so. Results suggest that women's advertised mate preferences provide clues to their underlying relationship interests and mate value.

**Keywords:** Mate preferences, mate value, mating strategies

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### Introduction

Women's mating strategies differ depending on a number of contexts and individual differences; however, the costs associated with revealing an interest in short-term mating may inhibit women from expressing their specific mating interests and desires. Because the characteristics women desire in a mate vary based on relationship context, the mate preferences a woman articulates may reveal her underlying mating strategies. Furthermore, because women's mate preferences vary depending on their mate value, stated mate preferences may be a reliable indicator of her mate value. In the present study, women's video dating profiles were analyzed to determine if her advertised mate preferences revealed information about her 1) desired relationship type (i.e., short-term or long-term) and 2) mate value.

### *Relationship Interests and Advertised Mate Preferences*

Women engage in a variety of mating strategies and relationship-types, including exclusive, committed relationships, serial mating, short-term sexual relationships, and extra-pair copulations (Buss and Schmitt, 1993; Gangestad and Simpson, 2000; Greiling and Buss, 2000; Symons, 1979). However, explicitly revealing an interest in certain relationship-types, such as casual sex or a short-term mating relationship, may be costly for women. Because men value sexual fidelity in long-term mates (Buss, 1989; Buss and Schmitt, 1993) expressing an interest in casual sex may harm a woman's long-term mating prospects. Furthermore, women engage in indirect aggression and victimization towards other women whom they perceive to be sexually accessible to men (Leenaars, Dane, and Marini, 2008; Vaillancourt and Sharma, 2011). These costs may result in a woman being less likely to explicitly reveal her relationship interests, particularly short-term mating interests.

Women's mating interests may be determinable by assessing other, more subtle, cues. Previous research has produced mixed results as to whether a woman's interest and inclination towards different relationship-types can be determined after only briefly observing her physical appearance and behavior. Early work found that strangers can accurately assess men's inclination towards short-term mating after viewing a video of the target, but not women's (Gangestad, Simpson, DiGeronimo, and Biek, 1992). However, research examining facial cues suggests that both men's and women's faces contain information that people use to accurately predict their mating orientation (Boothroyd, Cross, Gray, Coombes, and Gregson-Curtis, 2011; Boothroyd, Jones, Burt, DeBruine, and Perrett, 2008). In one recent study, observers viewed women who were video-taped while interacting with a male confederate. Although the observers were able to accurately assess the woman's inclination towards short-term mating, the researchers identified some cues as misleading, such as laughing, sitting close to the confederate, clothing style, and physical attractiveness. These misleading cues were correlated with observer perceptions of mating orientation but not with the woman's self-reported orientation (Stillman and Maner, 2009). The existence of such misleading cues may contribute to the varied success in accurately assessing women's mating strategies.

A woman's advertised mate preferences may provide another window into her relationship desires. Specific mate preferences are differentially preferred by women depending on their relationship orientation. Women more inclined towards long-term mating, compared to short-term mating, place greater weight on signals of commitment and resource acquisition potential in a mate (Buss and Schmitt, 1993; Townsend and Wasserman, 1998). Women interested in short-term mating increase the importance placed on sex appeal, muscularity, physical attractiveness, facial masculinity, and immediate displays of resources (Buss and Schmitt, 1993; Frederick and Haselton, 2007; Gangestad, Garver-Apgar, and Simpson, 2007; Haselton and Gangestad, 2006; Haselton and Miller, 2006; Pawlowski and Jasienska, 2005; Waynforth, Delwadia, and Camm, 2005). Gangestad and Simpson (2000) hypothesized that because women are unlikely to be able to acquire all desired traits in one mate, they favor traits related to investment ability in long-term partners and choose short-term mates who display "good genes" qualities, such as physical attractiveness and intelligence. As a result of these differences, attention to the specific traits a woman advertises as her mate preferences should reveal her relationship interests, even if she does not explicitly indicate an interest in a particular relationship type.

*Mate Value and Advertised Mate Preferences*

Women's advertised mate preferences should also reveal her underlying mate value. Studies across cultures have demonstrated that women higher in mate value specify more traits they desire in mates than women lower in mate value (Campos, Otta, and Siqueira, 2002; Oda, 2001; Pawlowski and Dunbar, 1999; Waynforth and Dunbar, 1995). Buss and Shackelford (2008) argued that because women high in mate value are most attractive to men they can afford to maintain higher standards across all categories of mate preferences. They classified women's mate preferences into four clusters of characteristics: 1) "good genes" indicators, such as physical attractiveness and intelligence, 2) good resource acquisition potential indicators, such as ambition, education, and good earning capacity, 3) good parenting indicators, such as fondness of children, kind and understanding, and maturity and 4) good partner indicators, such as being a loving partner, loyal, and committed to her. They found support for their hypothesis in a sample of newly-married women who rated their desire for mate preferences in the above categories. In line with their results, it is expected that women higher in mate value will describe mate preferences across all categories.

*Present Study and Hypotheses*

The present study investigated if a woman's advertised mate preferences were correlated with her relationship interests and mate value. Women created a video profile for a hypothetical dating website. Their advertised mate preferences were coded into the four categories hypothesized by Buss and Shackelford (2008) to test the following hypotheses:

H1: Short-term mating interest would be positively correlated with stating a desire for good genes indicators.

H2: Long-term mating interest would be positively correlated with stating a desire for resource acquisition potential indicators, good parenting indicators, and good partner indicators.

H3: Mate value would be positively correlated with stating a desire for indicators across all categories.

**Materials and Methods**

*Participants*

Sixty heterosexual female university undergraduates participated in the study in return for partial course credit. Data from one participant was excluded because her video did not record in its entirety due to equipment malfunction. The 59 remaining participants ranged in age from 18-27 ( $M = 19.0$ ,  $SD = 2.12$ ) and self-reported their relationship status as single ( $n = 40$ ), dating ( $n = 8$ ), exclusive relationship ( $n = 10$ ), married ( $n = 0$ ). One participant did not report her relationship status.

*Relationship Interests and Mate Value Measures*

Participants answered two questions to assess current mating interests. Some women were expected to be pursuing multiple mating strategies (Gangestad and Simpson, 2000), and a woman seeking both long-term and short-term mates may be interested in attracting good genes in short-term mates and other characteristics in long-term mates. Therefore, participants responded to independent scales to assess short-term and long-term

mating interest to isolate the unique relationships between mating interests and advertised preferences, regardless of how many mating strategies an individual participant was pursuing. To assess current desire for short-term mating, participants responded to the item, "Please rate the degree to which you are currently seeking a short-term mate (e.g. one-night stand, casual sex, etc.)" and to assess current desire for long-term mating they responded to the item, "Please rate the degree to which you are currently seeking a long-term mate (e.g. committed romantic relationship, spouse, etc.)." Both items were scored on a 7-point scale ranging from "1-Not at all seeking" to "7-Strongly seeking."

Two methods were used to assess mate-value. Participants responded to one item assessing self-perceived mate value (SPMV) that read, "What do you perceive your value on the mating market is relative to other people of your same sex?" It was scored on a 7-point scale ranging from "Very low" to "Very high." Because physical attractiveness is a principal component of women's mate value (Buss, 1989; Buss and Schmitt, 1993; Symons, 1979, 1995), third-party assessments of the women's physical attractiveness supplied another measure of mate value. Five raters who did not take part in the video collection process rated each woman's physical attractiveness. They viewed still images of the women taken from the beginning of each video before they began speaking and rated facial attractiveness, body attractiveness, and overall physical attractiveness, each on a 7-point scale ranging from "Very Unattractive" to "Very Attractive." The average measures intra-class correlations (ICC) indicated there was a high level of agreement between raters on these items (face ICC = .86, body ICC = .89, overall ICC = .90). This allowed for the use of the average of the rater's responses to the overall physical attractiveness question as an objective measure of mate value ( $M = 4.15$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ).

#### *Video Recording and Coding Procedure*

A cover story was used to encourage sincere participation and to assuage any participant concerns that the videos would be made public. The recruitment ad explained that the researcher was interested in creating a dating website for the university population, and each participant would create a video as though she were going to post it to her profile on the site. Female research assistants blind to the study's goals and hypotheses filmed the videos and interacted with the participants. The research assistant expanded on the cover story when the participant arrived at the lab, explaining that the researcher was deciding whether or not to include video profile options on the dating website and the participant videos would be analyzed to determine what information women convey. She also instructed the participant that the video should be about one minute long and assured her that the videos would not be uploaded to the site for public viewing.

After the consent process was completed, the research assistant allowed the participant to view a profile (containing only pictures and written information, no videos) on a mock-dating website created to convince participants of the veracity of the cover story. The research assistant then provided her with a list of potential topics that individuals often include in dating site profiles, such as describing their favorite books and movies, how they like to spend their free time, their values and worldview, and what they want in a relationship partner. The research assistant explained that the topics were designed to provide ideas to the participant and she was not required to use any of the topics provided.

Each participant was filmed from approximately mid-torso up, in the same room, with the chair and tripod positioned in the same place. Participants faced the camera with a

neutral expression and when directed began their videos with the sentence, “Hi, thanks for clicking on my profile.” After one minute of recording, the research assistant signaled to the participant to conclude her video and gave her as much time as she needed to finish. The research assistant stopped the recording when the participant stopped speaking if she spoke for less than one minute. For all participants, the research assistant offered to rerecord if the participant was not satisfied with her video. Seven participants filmed twice and in all cases the second video was used in analyses. The research assistant then left the room to allow the participant to privately respond to questions about the website she had viewed, her experience filming her video, and her relationship interests and self-perceived mate value. Upon completion, the research assistant debriefed her and explained that the cover story was designed to encourage sincere participation but that there was no website. She also asked the participant if she had believed the cover story or had any knowledge of the study’s goals. Four participants reported that they suspected the cover story was not true and was designed to make them behave realistically; however, no participants reported any knowledge of the study’s specific goals or hypotheses.

Videos ranged in length from 36 to 75 seconds ( $M = 63.5$ ). Two coders who did not film or rate the participants independently coded the videos for the presence of advertised mate preferences in each of the four categories (for a list of characteristics in each category see Buss and Shackelford, 2008). This generated four binary variables, each reflecting the presence or absence of advertised mate preferences in one of the four categories. There were three discrepancies in the coders’ judgments that were resolved by a third coder. In all three cases, the coders disagreed as to whether a woman was advertising a desire for good parenting indicators or good partner indicators. Fourteen of the women did not state any desired mate preferences (rather, they only described themselves and their interests not related to their mate preferences). This was unexpected, and another binary variable was created to reflect whether or not a woman had advertised any mate preferences at all.

## **Results**

First, the correlations between the measures of mating interest and mate value were computed to ensure their independence from one another, and the correlations between the mate value measures were computed to determine if they measured similar constructs. Spearman’s rank order correlation coefficients were performed because of non-normal distributions in the short-term mating interest ( $M = 2.07$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ,  $W(59) = .74$ ,  $p < .01$ ), long-term mating interest ( $M = 4.85$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ,  $W(59) = .86$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and SPMV ( $M = 4.31$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ,  $W(59) = .91$ ,  $p < .01$ ) measures. SPMV was not correlated with either long-term mating interest ( $r_s(57) = .12$ ,  $p = .57$ ) or short-term mating interest ( $r_s(57) = -.04$ ,  $p = .75$ ) and long-term and short-term mating interest were not significantly correlated with one another,  $r_s(57) = .14$ ,  $p = .28$ . Attractiveness was not correlated with long-term mating interest ( $r_s(57) = -.18$ ,  $p = .16$ ) or short-term mating interest ( $r_s(57) = -.20$ ,  $p = .13$ ). However, attractiveness and SPMV also were not correlated with one another,  $r_s(57) = .13$ ,  $p = .34$ .

Table 1 shows the correlations between choosing to describe any mate preferences and the different categories of preferences, and mating interest, SPMV, and attractiveness. Because some women did not describe any mate preferences, correlations were computed between each of the measures of mating interest and mate value with the presence of

stating mate preferences at all. Stating any mate preferences was negatively correlated with short-term mating interest. Stating any mate preferences was also positively correlated with objectively observed physical attractiveness.

The 14 women who did not state any mate preferences were excluded from the analyses examining relationships between specific categories of mate preferences and mating interests and mate value. Two correlations between mating interest or mate value and any of the categories of mate preferences were significant. Describing good partner indicators was positively correlated with long-term mating interest. SPMV was positively correlated with describing good genes indicators. Upon discovering this correlation, the good genes characteristics were further delineated into two major categories: intelligence and physical attractiveness. SPMV was significantly positively correlated with describing characteristics related to physical attractiveness, but not intelligence.

**Table 1.** Stated mate preferences correlations with short-term mating (STM) interest, long-term mating (LTM) interest, attractiveness, and SPMV.

Mate Preference	STM	LTM	Attractiveness	SPMV
Any Mate Preferences	-.27*	-.08	.37**	-.14
Preference Type:				
-Good Genes	.08	-.04	.14	.44**
-Intelligence	.03	.20	.09	.21
-Physical Attractiveness	-.27	-.21	.06	.42**
-Investment Potential	.14	-.10	-.22	.06
-Parenting	.08	.08	-.09	.11
-Partner	.24	.37*	-.15	.12

Note. \* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$

There were no relationships between the length of the women’s videos or speed with which they spoke and mating interest or mate value. Length and words per second (WPS) were unrelated to short-term mating interest (length:  $r(57) = -.12, p = .38$ , WPS:  $r(57) = .08, p = .57$ ), long-term mating interest (length:  $r(57) = .00, p = .98$ , WPS:  $r(57) = -.08, p = .54$ ), SPMV (length:  $r(57) = -.07, p = .60$ , WPS:  $r(57) = .09, p = .50$ ), and attractiveness (length:  $r(57) = -.09, p = .52$ , WPS:  $r(57) = .21, p = .12$ ). This ensured that the relationships between the relationship interests or mate value and mate preferences could not be attributable to women speaking more slowly or for a shorter period of time.

## Discussion

The data revealed differences in women’s advertised mate preferences associated with their relationship interests and mate value. The hypothesis that long-term mating interest would be positively correlated with describing good partner traits in a desired mate was supported. This demonstrates that long-term mating interested women’s advertised mate preferences communicate their mating orientation. The relative youth of the sample may explain why long-term mating interest was not correlated with desiring resource acquisition potential traits and good parenting traits. The women in this sample may be

concerned that advertising those mate preferences may make them appear unattractive, or too demanding, to males of a similar age. Future research could benefit from examining a broader age range of women to determine if and when these advertised preferences change.

The hypothesis that women interested in short-term mating would preference good genes indicators was not supported. Researchers have hypothesized different functions for short-term mating other than obtaining good genes, such as obtaining immediate resource investment, ending a relationship with a current long-term partner in favor of a new one, and engaging in a short-term mating relationship with the goal of converting it into a long-term committed relationship (Greiling and Buss, 2000). Mate preferences should vary in service of these functions such that assessing short-term mating interest alone provides insufficient predictive value. Furthermore, short-term mating interested women were less likely to describe any desired partner traits at all. Instead, they opted to use their time to describe themselves and their other interests. Short-term mating interested women may be better served by advertising themselves and their attributes to achieve their mating goals. These results suggest that future research should focus on how the advertised preferences of short-term mating interested women will differ based on the different hypothesized functions of short-term mating.

Women's attractiveness was positively correlated with describing mate preferences overall, although each mate preference category was unrelated to attractiveness. This positive correlation supports the hypothesis put forward by Buss and Shackelford (2008) that women higher in mate value will be more demanding in their mate preferences. Interestingly, SPMV showed a different pattern of results than attractiveness. The non-significant correlation between SPMV and attractiveness indicates that women's perception of their own mate value was unrelated to their physical attractiveness. SPMV was positively correlated with stating a preference for good genes traits. Women who had a high opinion of their relative mate value were more likely to describe traits they desired in mates related specifically to physical attractiveness. Perhaps these women preference these traits as a misleading signal to their attractiveness. By being more demanding, they mimic women who are objectively more physically attractive. However, their focus on physical attractiveness is a cue that their SPMV differs from their other-observed mate value.

Limitations regarding the assessment of mate preferences, mating interests and self-perceived mate value should also be noted. The single items assessing each construct may not have comprehensively captured women attitudes and desires. Furthermore, women may not always be consciously aware of, or willing to admit to, their mating interests or mate value. Future research would benefit from reexamining the hypotheses tested here using more comprehensive measures and measures that rely less on self-report. Also, it is possible that the results of the present study do not comprehensively reflect women's mate preferences because participants were limited in the time they had to prepare and record their videos. Given the opportunity to consider all identified preferred mate characteristics, these results may have been different. However, other studies using data sources in which people generate descriptions of mate preferences have replicated findings of studies in which people are given the opportunity to rate comprehensive lists of traits (Dunn, Brinton, and Clark, 2010; Waynforth and Dunbar, 1995; Wiederman, 1993). Present findings indicate that these data sources provide another method of accessing women's mate preferences.

Identifying valid cues to mating interest and mate value benefits our understanding of women's mate preferences. Furthermore, this study identified important individual differences that predict how women will advertise themselves in a mate attraction scenario and provides unique knowledge as to how a woman's advertised mate preferences in a realistic mate attraction context reveal more about her than what she explicitly says.

**Acknowledgements:** The author would like to thank Laith Al-Shawaf, Kelly Asao, Daniel Conroy-Beam, and David Lewis for their comments on earlier versions of this manuscript. Special thanks goes to Judith Easton for her feedback.

**Received 25 March 2013; Revision received 22 May 2013; Accepted 23 May 2013**

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