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WORKING PAPER

CAN BUY ME LOVE: HOW MATING CUES INFLUENCE SINGLE MEN'S INTEREST IN HIGH-STATUS CONSUMER GOODS¹

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Abstract

In two experiments we demonstrate that men display an enhanced interest in status enhancing consumption upon exposure to mating cues. Men indicate a higher interest in high-status products (study 1) and more readily noticed high-status products (study 2) after exposure to sexily, rather than plainly, dressed women. The effects are restricted to single men, suggesting that the acquisition or consumption of a luxurious product functions as a mate attraction mechanism.

CAN BUY ME LOVE:

HOW MATING CUES INFLUENCE SINGLE MEN'S INTEREST IN HIGH-STATUS

CONSUMER GOODS

With the purpose of catching and holding consumers' attention advertisers often make use of sexually provocative images (Dahl, Sengupta, and Vohs 2009). For instance, a couple of years ago, Axe® launched an ad campaign for men's shower gel. The ad depicted a female body (not the face) wearing a rather tight bikini. The entire body was covered in mud and "wash me" was written on her abdomen. The tagline said "Get dirty". Given that those provocative images often are of no or little relevance to the advertised product (Reichert and Lambiase 2003) advertisers thus seem to assume that consumers can be influenced by sexual cues. This assumption is based on the well-known male preference for young, attractive mates (Maner et al. 2003). It appears that this insight is extensively applied in advertising practices (Colarelli and Dettman 2003) in order to draw consumers' attention and to increase sales.

Sexual cues may not only affect sales of products associated with the cues, but may have more general effects as well. For instance, Wilson and Daly (2004) found that exposure to sexy women cues increased the rate of temporal discounting in men (for a similar finding see also Van den Bergh, Dewitte, and Warlop 2008). The current paper tests the idea that exposure to sexual cues also may increase men's attention to and desire for high-status (luxury) consumer goods. Moreover, we examine whether the effect of mating cues is restricted to single men, to test the hypothesis that acquisition or consumption of a luxurious product could function as a mate attraction mechanism. Put differently, we conjecture that when single men are exposed to a sexy female a signalling response may be triggered.

SEX DIFFERENCES IN MATE PREFERENCES

Several researchers (Bjorklund and Shackelford 1999; Feingold 1992; Kenrick, Sadalla, Groth, and Trost 1990; Trivers 1972) argue that sex differences in minimum parental investment have given rise to sex differences in mate preferences over the course of our evolutionary past. Various studies have found that women's reproductive interests are best served by selecting a mate who will not only carry strong genes in order for the offspring to survive, but who is also willing to invest maximally in her and her offspring (Bjorklund and Shackelford 1999; Brase 2006; Buss and Schmitt 1993). Throughout evolution, women have developed a preference for men who can provide food, shelter and protection for her and the offspring (Buss 1989; Geary 2000). Currently, this 'caretaking' can easily be translated into providing adequate economical resources (Hill and Buss 2008). Therefore, women tend to prefer men with great ambition and diligence, traits related to high social status and financial prosperity (Buss 1989; Li, Bailey, Kenrick, and Linsenmeier 2002). Women place, substantially more than men, importance on monetary resources and hence prefer partners that are highly educated and capable of offering a corresponding income (Buss and Barnes 1986). Previous research has revealed that women often set minimum financial standards before even considering dating potential mates (Kenrick et al. 1990). Men's odds on attracting a mate will increase if they focus on acquiring and displaying material resources (Buss 1988; Colarelli and Dettman 2003).

In comparison to women, who prefer non-appearance related characteristics, men have an evolved preference for mates who are physically attractive (Buss and Barnes 1986; Feingold 1992). It has been hypothesized that men place greater

importance on physical appearance of potential mates as physical attractiveness offers a powerful cue for reproductive capacity. Beauty subsumes a young appearance, a healthy body, and thus signals fertility (Buss 1988; Buss and Barnes 1986). Therefore men, more than women, value potential mates who exude youth and health (Buss 1989; Buss and Schmitt 1993).

Human mating behaviour can be construed as a complex exchange process in which each party simultaneously offers and seeks resources (Baumeister and Vohs 2004; Hirschman 1987). Several content analyses of “dating advertisements” indicate that men especially offer financial resources and seek females’ physical attractiveness, while women especially offer physical attractiveness and seek financial resources (Hirschman 1987; Wiederman 1993). These findings provide an explanation of why idealized images of physical attractiveness found in advertising have a negative impact on women’s self-perceptions (Richins 1991; Smeesters and Mandel 2006) and why exposure to idealized images of financial success in advertising have negative effects on men’s self-evaluations (Gulas and McKeage 2000).

CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION AND THE EXTENDED SELF

According to Belk (1978) people form an overall impression of one another by means of the other’s possessions and expenditures. Visible consumption information can be used to draw inferences about another consumer’s social status and personality (Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1982). Hence, women may form an impression of potential mates through the visible consumption of that potential mate. In turn, men may engage in impression management through the acquisition and display of high-status products. Previous research indicated that the use of ingratiation tactics engenders a

positive effect on perceptions of interpersonal attraction and likeability (Gordon 1996). Conveying the right impression increases the probability of achieving a highly valued outcome (Leary and Kowalski 1990). More specifically, making a good impression may lead to finding a suitable mate.

In a typical consumer culture, the products an individual uses may thus be a potent information source that allows others to make inferences about the consumer. The very process of consumption may serve as an indication that a consumer holds traits that are favored by the opposite sex. To a certain extent, consumers consider products as an extension of the self (Belk 1988; Solomon 1983) not bought to serve a functional purpose but bought to communicate an identity (Dittmar 2004) and adjunct lifestyle. Hence, high-status products such as luxurious cars or hi-tech goods may conspicuously signal that the owner has the ability to acquire a high social status and corresponding resources (Colarelli and Dettmann 2003; Wegener 1992). Hence, ostentation can be seen as a consequence of the desire to signal status and wealth (Amaldoss and Jain 2005). Purchasing luxurious items or expensive goods displaying social status to significant others was described by Veblen (1899) as conspicuous consumption. Veblen noted that the rich invested a considerable amount of time and money to purchase unnecessary and superfluous goods. The so-called leisure class indulged in conspicuous consumption and lavishly spent their money merely to rise above others and to achieve greater social status (Veblen 1899). Conspicuous goods differ from many other goods by not only satisfying one's material needs but also satisfying social needs such as prestige (Belk 1988). When a consumer feels powerless (i.e., not in control), he or she might also engage in compensating through the acquisition of luxury products and hence demonstrating status to others (Rucker and Galinsky 2008, 2009). Whereas the snob effect arises from consumers' need to be

exclusive and to dissociate themselves from the “common people”, conspicuous consumption is mainly about signalling wealth. Thus, the pricing of the goods plays an important role (Amaldoss and Jain 2005; Leibenstein 1950). For instance, brand selection often depends on the proximity of other consumers in a shopping environment: In order not to look cheap consumers are more likely to opt for the more expensive brand when other consumers are in the close vicinity (Argo, Dahl, and Manchanda 2005). Because price often is used as a means to signal prestige possessing expensive goods may signal that the owner has adequate financial resources. That is why biologists describe conspicuous consumption as an “honest signal”, a signal that is difficult to fake (Colarelli and Dettmann 2003). Consequently, displaying high-status consumer goods may also function as a means to signal mate quality. Griskevicius et al. (2007) have found that mating motives-specifically for men-increase the intent to purchase luxury products or expensive brands to conspicuously flaunt success and resources. Apparently, romantic desires made men heighten their intention of spending on conspicuous goods, but not on inconspicuous (i.e., functional) goods. Moreover, men intended to spend less on inconspicuous goods when induced to romantic desires. Probably, the mating perspective activated a romantic or sexual goal and encouraged men to attach greater meaning to displaying success through conspicuous consumption.

MATE ATTRACTION GOAL

Goals lead the cognitive system in its pursuit of a desired end state. Active goals may lead to evaluative and perceptual readiness. Ferguson (2008) found that implicit goal activation is associated with *evaluative readiness*, that is increased

positive attitudes for objects that may serve the implicitly activated goal. When positively evaluated, the object becomes more likely to be approached and therefore people may engage in goal-relevant behavior (Ferguson and Bargh 2004). Put differently, goals can be seen as benefits consumers search in product attributes that may enhance the achievement of one's goals (Huffman and Houston 1993). The compatibility of an object and its active goal determines its value. Therefore, the value consumers attach to an object may change when the goal has been reached or when the goal changes over time and situations. Evaluative readiness is more pronounced for people for whom the goal is more currently relevant (Ferguson 2008). For instance, when one is thirsty a glass of fresh, cold water will be desired and thus highly valued whereas when one just had a drink and thirst is quenched the glass of water will no longer be of any relevance. Once the goal is met goal-related stimuli will no longer be positively evaluated and become undesirable (Ferguson and Bargh 2004). Thus, as people's motivation changes an object's goal-relevance may change accordingly.

Activated goals may also lead to *perceptual readiness*: Information that is needed to pursue a goal or to process information of great importance at that moment will receive most attention (Moskowitz 2000). According to Bruner (1957) people perceive environmental cues and will categorize those cues. Categorizing and defining them will have consequences on people's later behavior toward those cues. In other words, when people are particularly interested in something they are more likely to notice objects related to the subject of interest. For instance, if you want to purchase a Lexus suddenly you will notice Lexus everywhere or if you are planning on having a baby you will perceive only pregnant women. The focus of your attention will be the currently important subject of interest, the ultimate goal. People will

become ready to pursue that goal that is desirable by giving attention to those environmental cues that are important to better meet the currently active goal (Bruner 1957). The attention to and perception of goal-relevant stimuli will prepare people for intentional action. Research by Aarts, Dijksterhuis, and De Vries (2001) showed that basic needs, such as thirst, may lead to a heightened cognitive accessibility for stimuli that can satisfy those needs. Meaning that the more goal-relevant knowledge is accessible, and thus the more perceptually ready, the more likely people will achieve the goal.

THE PRESENT RESEARCH

Our research contributes to the existing literature in several ways. Some research has already been carried out on evaluative readiness. In this area, we extend Griskevicius et al. 's (2007) findings that exposure to mating cues may prompt men to engage in conspicuous consumption. In the current studies we present an implicit activation of the mate attraction goal by exposing male participants to pictures of sexy women (study 1) and a real-life sexy woman (study 2). In addition, we measure conspicuous consumption indirectly via a visual display task (study 2). Therefore, our research may be of particular relevance in marketing: implicit environmental cues may have an effect on consumers behavior in a retail context: Environmental cues may act as input cues that prime a psychological orientation directed toward mate attraction (Roney 2003). Men's cognitive system notifies a potential sexual mate is present and therefore men will behave according their need to attract the potential mate (Todd, Penke, Fasolo, and Lenton 2007). That is, exposure to mating primes causes changes in self-conceptions (Gutierrez, Kenrick, and Partch 1999; Millar and

Ostlund 2006) that foster greater compliance with mate preferences of the opposite sex. For instance, exposure to mating cues renders men more favorable towards wealth and makes them want to display greater ambition, increases the importance they attach to social status and heightens their interest in an active dating life (Roney 2003). Therefore, in order to attract potential mates, men will engage in displaying social status through acquisition of high-status objects. In turn, men will value high-status objects more because they may enhance attainment of the mate attraction goal (Markman and Brendl 2000).

A second contribution of this research is that we demonstrate that activating the mate attraction goal leads to perceptual readiness. When the mate attraction goal is activated men's attention is drawn to those environmental cues that may facilitate achieving the mate attraction goal. Since women prefer financially successful mates men's attention may be drawn to high-status goods. To the best of our knowledge, this effect has not been demonstrated before.

We will argue that men's interest in high-status consumer goods increases in a mating environment, that is after exposure to a sexy female. We therefore suggest that men will place greater value on high-status products than on functional products. As single men are more likely to focus on the chronic mate attraction goal than men in a committed relationship, single men's attitudes toward objects that may enhance one's status are more likely to increase after exposure to mating cues than the attitudes of men in a committed relationship are.

The current studies extend previous research by demonstrating that the impact of mating cues on interest in conspicuous consumption is not equally effective for single men and men in a committed relationship, due to differences in goal-motivation. We hypothesize that exposure to a sexy female (mating cue) will

temporarily activate the mate attraction goal in men. However, men who are involved in a committed relationship will not be prone to this mate attraction goal since their mate attraction goal has already been fulfilled (Maner et al. 2003). Therefore, we argue that this mate attraction goal is only activated among single men. When the mate attraction goal is activated, items that may enhance the achievement of the mate attraction goal may become temporarily more important (Markman and Brendl 2000). Therefore, we propose exposure to mating primes causes single men to focus on the acquisition of high-status products. Because acquiring high-status products may lead to the realization of the mate attraction goal and functional products do not, we propose that single men will temporarily and automatically attach more importance to luxury items.

More specifically, Study 1 aims to show that single men display higher prestige sensitivity after exposure to pictures of viable mating partners (sexily dressed young women) than after exposure to pictures of plainly dressed young women. Abbey (1987) found that females who wear tight clothes (i.e., accentuating their bodies) and display more skin are to be found more attractive by men than females who are plainly dressed. Indeed, men favor sexily dressed women as potential sexual partners (Grammer, Renninger, and Fischer 2004).

H1: Exposure to mating cues will lead single men to evaluative readiness:
Exposure to a potential mate may render the perception of high-status products as more favorable.

In Study 2 we hypothesize that exposure to a “real-life” sexily dressed, rather than a plainly dressed, female experimenter causes single men to gain an automatic

attention for high-status products. Sexy clothing should trigger the need for displaying social status. In turn, this heightened goal of displaying social status should render high-status products in a visual display more salient than functional products.

H2: Exposure to mating cues will lead single men to perceptual readiness: Exposure to a potential mate may automatically heighten interest in and attention for high-status products.

STUDY 1

Exposure to desirable mates will cause changes in male attitudes fostering greater compliance with women's mating preferences. When selecting a mate, women opt for men who show ambition and strive towards a high social status (Buss 1989). As a consequence, we hypothesize that men will behave accordingly and adopt traits related to a high social status. Maner et al. (2003) found that relationship status moderates selective attention for attractive others: Single individuals are more likely to attend to attractive opposite-sex members than committed participants. Additionally, single men are also more inclined to seek out and meet attractive mates than committed men and therefore are more motivated than the latter to scan the environment for mating opportunities (Maner, Gailliot, Rouby, and Miller 2007). As a result, the mate attraction goal is more strongly pronounced for single men than for men in a committed relationship. Priming single men with mating cues activates their mate attraction goal. Consistent with the predictions derived from Markman and Brendl (2000), we hypothesize that-since objects that may enhance the mate attraction

goal will be valued more-single men will place greater importance on high-status products but not on plain, functional products.

Participants

Sixty-nine male heterosexual students, varying in age from 19 to 27 years ($M = 22$, $SD = 1.47$) participated in this experiment. In exchange, the students received a participation fee of €6.

Procedure

Participants were seated in separate cubicles. In a picture rating task, 15 pictures of non-nude female models who appeared to be in their 20s, were displayed on a computer screen (Van den Bergh et al. 2008). In the mating cue condition, the models were dressed in a sexually appealing manner (e.g., wearing lingerie or a bikini). In the control condition, the models wore unrevealing, plain clothes.

Prestige sensitivity. Subsequently, participants filled out the prestige sensitivity scale which is defined by the authors as assessing “favorable perceptions of a price cue based on feelings of prominence and status that higher prices signal to other people about the purchaser” (Lichtenstein, Ridgway, and Netemeyer 1993, 236). The scale consists of nine items such as “I enjoy the prestige of buying a high priced brand.” Participants had to indicate whether they agreed with each item on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from -3 (definitely not agree) to +3 (definitely agree). The responses to all items were averaged to obtain a general prestige sensitivity score (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .80$).

Relationship status. Afterwards, participants described their relationship status on a seven-point Likert scale from 1 (“I am single”) to 7 (“I am married”). Participants were classified in two groups: single (for responses lower than 3) ($n = 24$) and in a committed relationship (for responses above 3) ($n = 39$). The lone participant with an exact score of 3 (“I have a relationship since a couple of days/weeks”) was dropped as he neither was single nor seriously involved in a relationship. Including or excluding this one participant did not influence the results.

Results

An ANOVA with Mating cue (pictures of sexily dressed women vs. pictures of plainly dressed women) and Relationship status (single vs. committed relationship) revealed a marginally significant main effect of Mating cue ($F(1, 59) = 3.37, p = .07$). Participants indicated having more favorable perceptions of high-status products after exposure to pictures of sexily dressed women ($M = -.68, SD = 1.02$) than after exposure to pictures of plainly dressed women ($M = -.98, SD = .64$). More importantly, the analysis yielded a significant two-way interaction between Mating cue and Relationship status ($F(1, 59) = 4.60, p = .04$). Single men indicated having more favorable perceptions of high-status products after exposure to pictures of sexily dressed women ($M = -.33, SD = 1.08$) than after exposure to pictures of plainly dressed women ($M = -1.20, SD = .68$), ($t(59) = 2.52, p = .01$). For men in a committed relationship, no differences were obtained between the mating cue condition ($M = -.95, SD = .91$) and the control condition ($M = -.88, SD = .61$), ($t(59) = .25, NS$).

Discussion

In Study 1, we demonstrated that men scored higher on the prestige sensitivity scale after exposure to pictures of sexily dressed women (mating cue condition) than after exposure to pictures of plainly dressed women (control condition). However, the obtained pattern differed for single men and men involved committed relationships. As expected, single men had more favorable perceptions of high-status products in the mating condition than in the control condition. For men involved in a committed relationship, no differences were obtained between the mating cue condition and the control condition. This indicates that exposure to mating cues increases the interest in high-status goods in single men but not in men in a committed relationship. The results of Study 1 are consistent with the hypothesis that exposure to mating cues leads to evaluative readiness for stimuli that can facilitate the mate attraction goal. Study 2 will investigate whether exposure to mating cues leads to perceptual readiness, namely the automatically enhanced attention towards high-status products. In addition, in Study 2, we will use a real-life sexy woman as a mating cue. Although previous research has rarely used a real-life person, we think this may be an important asset to the study and will increase the ecological validity of our results.

STUDY 2

To investigate whether exposure to a mating cue induces perceptual readiness, participants in Study 2 were briefly exposed to several visual displays consisting of six products and subsequently were instructed to list as many products as they could recall (Roskos-Ewoldsen and Fazio 1992). Of the six products within a given display,

only one product was associated with a high status (e.g., expensive car, exclusive watch). We hypothesize that exposure to a mating cue will automatically divert attention towards the objects in the visual display that evoke a high social status and that this will be especially the case for single men. We exposed male participants to either a sexily dressed female experimenter or a plainly dressed female experimenter before engaging in a visual status display task.

Participants

One hundred and thirty-three male students participated, varying in age from 17 to 32 years ($M = 20$, $SD = 1.79$). In exchange, the students received a participation fee of €6.

Procedure

Participants were seated in separate cubicles. We manipulated the clothes of the female experimenter who led the experiment. Two conditions were created, to which participants were randomly assigned: The experimenter was either plainly (control condition, see photo 1 in Appendix) or sexily dressed (mating cue condition, see photo 2 in Appendix). The two conditions were balanced over the morning sessions and the afternoon sessions. The female experimenter was not acquainted with the purpose of the study beforehand. Because it was important that the participants had a close look at the experimenter, they were scheduled but every 15 minutes and thus entered the lab individually. The experimenter escorted every participant to his cubicle and went through the instructions with him. This procedure was practiced

with her beforehand as she would act similarly with each participant and give each participant similar information.

Status display task. Participants engaged in a computerized visual attention task. Participants were instructed that they would be exposed to six products on a computer screen for a short period of time and asked to identify as many products as possible. They were exposed to ten different displays, each consisting of six different product pictures. Each display remained on the screen for one second and comprised one picture of a high-status product (e.g., exclusive watch) and five pictures of functional products (e.g., coffee mug), randomly arranged in a circle on the computer screen. After exposure to each screen, participants had 25 seconds to write down the products they remembered after which the subsequent display was exposed.

In a pretest the 60 pictures-all selected from a professional photo database-were rated on status relatedness (“do you think this product is status-oriented?”), with answers ranging on a scale from 1 (no, not at all) to 6 (yes, very much). Conform our expectations the ten selected status products scored higher on status relatedness ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 0.63$) than the fifty selected functional products ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 1.03$), ($t(57) = -17.2$, $p < .001$).

Relationship status. To check to what extent the participants were involved in a (serious) relationship their relationship status was asked. Responses were made using the same scale as in Study 1, ranging from 1 (“I am single”) to 7 (“I am married”). Score 3 (“I have a relationship since a couple of days/weeks”) was excluded as these participants ($n = 5$) neither were single nor yet seriously involved in a relationship. Each participant received a dichotomous relationship status score:

single ($n = 72$) (for responses lower than 3) or in a committed relationship ($n = 61$) (for responses above 3).

Manipulation check. At the end of the experiment, each participant was asked to indicate their impression of the experimenter and to rate 20 qualities and character traits on a 10-point scale. Participants were told the female experimenter was a trainee and that, in order to maintain the quality of the experiment, she had to dispose of certain qualities. It was claimed to be important that she was adequate and professional for the results of the research would not be affected by her presence. Amongst a number of filler qualities, “attractiveness” and “seductiveness” were assessed. Ratings for the two critical qualities were averaged and formed an ‘overall appeal’ score (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .86$).

Results

Manipulation check. An independent t-test revealed a significant difference in Mating cue ratings ($t(129) = -7.28, p < .001$). As intended, participants found the sexily dressed version of the experimenter more appealing ($M = 8.52, SD = 1.23$) than the plainly dressed version of the experimenter ($M = 6.20, SD = 2.24$). No interaction effect was found between Mating cue (sexy vs. plain) and Relationship status (single vs. committed) ($F(1,127) = .54, NS$). Presumably, single men are not more likely than committed men to notice sexy women, but they may be more eager to engage in mating tactics and behave correspondently.

Status display task. A three-way ANOVA with Mating cue (sexy vs. plain) and Relationship status (single vs. committed) as between-subjects factors and Product type (high-status product vs. functional product) as a within-subjects factor was conducted on the proportion of products recalled. This proportion was calculated across the ten displays (i.e., across the ten displayed high-status products and the fifty displayed functional products, respectively).

The analysis revealed a significant main effect of Product type ($F(1, 129) = 6.91, p = .01$). Apparently, a higher proportion of the high-status products ($M = .36, SD = .16$) was remembered than of the functional products ($M = .32, SD = .05$).

Furthermore, the analysis yielded a significant two-way interaction between Product type and Mating cue ($F(1, 129) = 4.53, p = .03$). Participants who were exposed to the sexily dressed experimenter, recalled a higher proportion, but not significantly so, of the high-status products ($M = .38, SD = .15$) than participants who were exposed to the plainly dressed experimenter ($M = .34, SD = .16$), ($t(131) = -1.60, NS$). Conversely, participants who were exposed to the sexily dressed experimenter recalled a significantly lower proportion of functional products ($M = .31, SD = .06$) than participants who were exposed to the plainly dressed experimenter ($M = .33, SD = .05$), ($t(131) = 2.34, p = .02$).

A three-way interaction, however, indicated that the above described two-way interaction only held for participants who were single ($F(1, 129) = 4.42, p = .04$). Participants in committed relationships recalled almost the same proportion of high-status products in both experimenter conditions ($M_{\text{sexy}} = .33, SD = .13$ vs. $M_{\text{plain}} = .35, SD = .17$), ($t(129) = .43, NS$), whereas single men recalled a significantly higher proportion of the high-status products after exposure to the sexily dressed experimenter ($M = .43, SD = .17$) than after exposure to the plainly dressed

experimenter ($M = .33$, $SD = .15$), ($t(129) = -2.80$, $p < .01$). The pattern for the functional products was reversed. Single men recalled more of the functional products when exposed to the plainly dressed experimenter ($M = .34$, $SD = .06$) than to the sexily dressed experimenter ($M = .31$, $SD = .06$), ($t(129) = 1.92$, $p = .06$). Participants who were involved in a committed relationship recalled not significantly more of the functional products when exposed to the plainly dressed experimenter ($M = .33$, $SD = .04$) than to the sexily dressed experimenter ($M = .31$, $SD = .05$), ($t(129) = -1.31$, NS) (see Figure 1).

Insert figure 1 about here

Discussion

Study 2 revealed that, overall, men recalled a higher proportion of the high-status products than of the functional products. However, participants in the mating cue condition recalled a higher proportion of high-status products than participants in the control condition. The pattern for the functional products was reversed. The elevated attention to high-status products was obtained for single men only. Single men recalled a higher proportion of the high-status products in the mating cue condition than in the control condition. In contrast, participants in committed relationships recalled almost the same proportion of high-status products in both conditions. Because single men are more motivated to achieve their mate attraction goal, they will be particularly interested in those products that can facilitate meeting that goal. These findings are consistent with Study 1 and suggest that mating cues, specifically for single men, can lead to an *automatically* heightened interest in high-

status products and in an increased diversion of attention to detect these high-status products (i.e., single men become perceptually ready).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The current research examined how variation in goal motivation affects men's interest in high-status products in a mating environment. The two studies presented in this paper demonstrate that exposing men to cues of women in sexy attire leads the single-but not the committed-men to automatically pay attention to and to long for high-status products. Study 1 suggests that exposure to mating cues increases men's interest in high-status products. Based on Markman and Brendl (2000), we predicted and demonstrated that the value of high-status products increases because these products may enhance and facilitate reaching the mate attraction goal.

Study 2, however, suggests that exposure to mating cues may *automatically* increase interest in conspicuous consumption. Exposure to mating cues increased men's attention to high-status products in a task where this was irrelevant. Actually, the aim of the task was to write down as many displayed items as possible. The increased attention to high-status products was off-set by a decreased attention for functional products and, hence, did not promote task-relevant achievement. Apparently, the presence of a sexily dressed female set off a process of heightened automatic attention for luxury and status-evoking products in men. Interestingly, in both studies, the effects were obtained for single men only.

The contribution of our research is threefold. First, to our knowledge, perceptual readiness has not yet been linked to mate attraction goal motivation until now. Moskowitz (2002) explains perceptual readiness in terms of goal pursuit: The

information that is needed to pursue a goal will receive the most attention. Indeed, our set of studies confirmed that exposure to mating cues automatically enhanced the interest in and the attention for high-status products. Through an implicit activation of the mate attraction goal (i.e., exposure to a sexy woman) we demonstrated that the attention of single men automatically is drawn to high-status goods.

Second, the current study extends previous work on evaluative readiness in the mating environment. As described by Ferguson (2008) evaluative readiness involves an active goal that triggers the readiness to strive towards achieving that goal. Consumer products often are seen as an extension of the self (Belk 1978). Therefore, consumers are particularly aware of the signaling function of the products they purchase. Because of women's preference for financially successful mates (Li et al. 2002) men may feel the urge of displaying their status through consumption. Griskevicius et al. (2007) have already shown that mating cues increased men's intention to engage in conspicuous consumption. Our work corroborates these findings and extends previous research by activating the mate attraction goal indirectly via pictures of sexy women.

Third, our research shows that the heightened valuing of goal-oriented products upon exposure to mating cues does not occur with all male participants. In the line Ferguson's work (2008) only those participants who were motivated to achieve the mate attraction goal showed heightened interest in the high-status products. Put differently, the mating cues only influenced single men since their mating objectives still needed to be realized. Single men will thus be more likely to signal preferential traits and to engage in displaying social status in an attempt to attract potential mates. Hence, single men are both evaluative and perceptually ready to engage in conspicuous consumption, upon exposure to mating cues. Possibly, men

in committed relationships may not be less likely than single men to notice sexy women, but they may be less likely to activate mate attraction tactics and engage in correspondent behavior. Committed men have already met their mate attraction goal and are therefore not urged to (sexually) interact with other women (Maner et al. 2003).

In addition, Study 2 was carried out using a real-life woman to make our research more ecologically valid.

Implications

Environmental cues may heighten the mate attraction goal activation in single men: a finding which may have strong marketing implications. A host of studies already suggest that images of attractive models in advertising may elicit positive feelings that are transferred to the advertised brand (Kim, Allen, and Kardes 1996). Moreover, when endorsing high-status products targeted at men, attractive models may not only function as a heuristic cue, influencing brand attitudes through affect transfer, but also as a central argument: “This is the brand that may increase your mating chances!” (Kang and Herr 2006). What would happen when posters of sexy women were displayed in a retail environment? Maybe a sexy saleswoman will have a significant influence on single men’s spending behavior? Presumably, mate attraction cues in the shopping environment may lure men into purchasing a more expensive brand than they had planned. So, the mere presence of a sexy woman may suffice to increase sales of high-ticket items. These effects, however, may be limited to single men.

Limitations and Future research

A potential limitation of our work is that we performed the studies in a lab setting. Therefore, only a heightened interest in high-status products could be noted. We could not check whether the interest in high-status products suffices to engage in actual consumption to impress a mate.

The current work may also be limited due to the selection of high-status products. Although the selected pictures were pretested, only tangible products were taken into account. Conspicuous consumption most probably is not limited to the acquisition of tangible products. People may as well conspicuously flaunt their status through the consumption of experiences. For instance, people can definitely display status when going on an exclusive and luxurious holiday or when having an expensive hobby. Therefore, it would be interesting in future work to examine whether similar effects hold for experiences.

While the current research focuses on heightened interest in goods that facilitate mating opportunities for men, future research might also examine the effect of mating cues on women. Given that men prefer mates who exude beauty and youth, women might attempt to increase their desirability as a mate by enhancing their attractiveness. Activating a mate attraction goal might lead to an increased interest in beauty-enhancing consumer products. The traits that women look for in potential mates can not be deducted from the physical appearance alone. Interestingly, the mere visual exposure to an attractive opposite other did not affect women concerning their value of material wealth (Roney 2003). Therefore, in comparison to men, the mere presence of a potential mate in the shopping environment may not suffice to increase sales of beauty-enhancing products. Previous research has shown that the rewarding

value of pictures of the opposite sex is greater in men than in women (Hayden, Parikh, Deaner, and Platt 2007). Therefore we predict that in order to get an effect with women, no less than a social interaction may be required.

Although mating tactics are particularly important in this group, the current studies may potentially be limited due to the use of college-aged participants. Therefore, we cannot foresee to what extent our findings can be generalized to other age samples.

Earlier research has already indicated that mating cues may trigger conspicuous consumption in men. The current set of studies, however, demonstrates that this effect may be limited to single men. Moreover, our studies demonstrate that exposure to mating cues may not only increase conspicuous consumption out of impression management concerns but also due to an automatic orientation to high-status goods. The findings of the current research can be seen as an invitation to investigate important issues for future research.

APPENDIX

Photo 1: plainly dressed



Photo 2: sexily dressed



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FIGURE 1

PROPORTION OF PRODUCTS RECALLED

(STUDY 2)

