

Intrasexual Mate Competition (Women): Mate Attraction Tactics



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Synonyms

Attraction techniques; Self-promotion; Mate manipulation

Definition

Competitive behaviors between members of the same sex, which function to increase the likelihood of attracting and retaining a mate, and/or decreasing a competitor's likelihood of doing the same.

Components of Intrasexual Competition

Intrasexual competition is competition between members of the same sex, with the ultimate goal of maximizing an individual's reproductive success relative to other same-sex members of the population. A key component of successful

reproduction is mate attraction and retention. Fisher and Cox (2011) identified four categories of intrasexual competition: self-promotion, competitor manipulation, competitor derogation, and mate manipulation. Tactics of mate attraction and retention primarily fall into the categories of self-promotion and mate manipulation. Self-promotion involves behaviors which function to enhance one's actual or apparent mate-value in the eyes of members of the opposite sex. It is competitive in that self-promoting behaviors are moderated by the presence and mate-value of same-sex competitors. Mate-manipulation describes behaviors which signal or advertise (either honestly or dishonestly) one's interest in and availability to a prospective mate. Therefore, mate attraction tactics comprise two main classes of implicitly competitive behaviors: those which function to make the focal female appear more attractive than other females to prospective mates; and those which function to make prospective mates perceive her to be more attainable than her competitors. An earlier taxonomy of mate attraction tactics (Buss, 1988) identified several mate attraction tactics used preferentially by women. These primarily fell into the category of self-promotion (including appearance enhancement via makeup, clothing, and other personal grooming habits) with fewer mate manipulation tactics exhibited by women (such as acting nice and giggling in the presence of men).

Tactics of Mate Attraction in Women: Physical Appearance Enhancement

Where the opposite sex exhibits a relative consensus regarding the traits considered most attractive in prospective mates, these traits become a likely vehicle for intrasexual competition in the focal sex (Bleske-Rechek & Buss, 2006). Female reproductive value peaks in young adulthood and declines rapidly after the age of 40 (Fitzgerald et al., 1998). Facial and bodily femininity are positive indicators of female reproductive potential (Wheatley et al., 2014), as is overall physical health (Hanson et al., 2017). As such, men perceive youthful, feminine, healthy women to be highly desirable mates (Silverthorne & Quinsey, 2000; Thomas et al., 2020). Such characteristics are primarily signaled via physical appearance, with men tending to prioritize the physical appearance of prospective mates more highly than do women (Buss, 1989; Thomas et al., 2020). Accordingly, Buss (1988) reported that the tactics that were believed to be more effective for women than men in attracting mates included wearing sexy clothes and wearing makeup. Physical appearance enhancement is therefore expected to be a primary vector for self-promotion in women. Appearance enhancing tactics, including using cosmetics and makeup, hair styling, clothing choice, and even cosmetic surgery, are demonstrated tactics of mate attraction in women (Walters & Crawford, 1994).

Makeup and Cosmetics

The use of makeup as a tactic of mate attraction is particularly popular given its ready accessibility. Both professionally applied (Etcoff et al., 2011) and self-applied (Aguinaldo & Peissig, 2021) makeup increase perceived attractiveness, by hiding blemishes and uneven skin tone, and by increasing the contrast around the mouth and eyes (Russell, 2003). Both men and women perceive made-up faces to be more attractive than plain faces (Batres et al., 2018). Makeup also enhances perceived health (Nash et al., 2006)

and youth in older women (Russell et al., 2019) – both reliable indicators of mate value.

Makeup's effects on physical appearance are not limited to enhancing perceived attractiveness. Made-up women are perceived as more confident (Nash et al., 2006) and more likely to pursue casual sex (Kellie et al., 2021) and to be promiscuous (Mileva et al., 2016). These latter perceptions appear somewhat accurate, as women with a stronger short-term mating orientation tend to wear more/heavier makeup (Wagstaff, 2018). Makeup also increases the frequency of waitress' tips (Guéguen & Jacob, 2011), and the frequency of solicitations women receive from men in a bar (Guéguen, 2008). Collectively, these findings suggest that makeup attracts mates via mate manipulation as well as self-promotion.

Intrasexually, women are also sensitive to the signals that makeup sends out. Makeup elicits jealousy in other women (Mileva et al., 2016), who perceive attractive made-up women to be interpersonally aggressive (Sulikowski et al., 2022). Intrasexual competitiveness positively predicts frequency of makeup use (Mafra et al., 2020) and makeup purchasing intentions (Wagstaff & Sulikowski, 2022) in women. Hence, makeup use is a tactic of mate attraction that involves both self-promotion and mate manipulation, and its use is related to women's mating motives and intrasexual competitiveness.

Clothing

While choice of clothing is logically expected to be able to increase apparent mate-value (by emphasizing or exaggerating attractive traits and camouflaging unattractive traits), most research pertaining to clothing choice relates to its role in mate manipulation. For example, women's desire for short-term mating encounters predicts their likelihood for wearing sheer, revealing clothing (Grammar et al., 2003; Durante et al., 2008). Women are also observed to wear more provocative clothing during the fertile phase of their ovulatory cycle. The women themselves viewed these clothing choices as more

provocative, as did male raters (Schwarz & Hassebrauck, 2008).

Hair Styling

Hair health is a reliable indicator of bodily health (Hinsz et al., 2001). Longer hair appears to be a tool of self-promotion as women report wanting their hair to be longer than it is (on average) and also report believing that men would prefer them to have longer hair than they do (Jacobi & Cash, 1994). For their part, men perceive women with longer hair to be more youthful, healthy, and sexy (Mesko & Bereczkei, 2004). Hair style may also play a role in mate attraction via mate manipulation. When long hair is worn out (as opposed to when it is tied back), women are perceived as more promiscuous (Matz & Hinsz, 2018).

Cosmetic Surgery

Similar to cosmetics and makeup, cosmetic surgery has two routes to impacting mate attraction: it alters physical appearance, with the putative goal of increasing apparent mate value (self-promotion), and it can also act as a signal of behavioral intent (mate manipulation). The use of cosmetic surgery has increased in acceptance as a form of appearance enhancement. Advances in medical technology have increased its safety and frequency of use in the population (Sarwer et al., 2008). Cosmetic surgery, like makeup, is related to mating effort and affects the perception of viewers, hence is an effective tactic of mate attraction. From the perspective of self-promotion, cosmetic surgery is notionally designed to increase physical attractiveness, and most recipients perceive that it does (Sarwer et al., 2008). As a signal of behavioral intent, acceptance of cosmetic surgery is associated with an unrestricted sociosexual orientation (short-term mating effort) and viewers accurately infer this (Bradshaw et al., 2019). Complicating the picture somewhat, the desire for cosmetic surgery predicts both benefit-provisioning and cost-inflicting long-term mating effort. Women who self-report

an interest in cosmetic surgery are also motivated to increase partner fidelity through both increasing relationship satisfaction (benefit-provisioning) and decreasing their partner's self-esteem (cost-inflicting, Atari et al., 2017).

Tactics of Mate Attraction in Women: Signaling Sexual Availability

Given men's reproductive success is limited by access to reproductively viable women, cues to women's sexual availability can be used to judge whether a woman may be available as a potential partner. For men, the potential reproductive gains of a short-term mating encounter are substantial (reproductive success with little to no long-term investment of resources), and so men are particularly attuned to cues and signals of short-term availability in women. Attracting men by signaling short-term sexual availability may occur in several ways. Dressing to impress and initiating physical contact are rated as more effective flirtation tactics when employed by women than men, and in a short-term, rather than long-term, context (Kennair et al., 2022).

The signaling of sexual availability or interest in a short-term sexual encounter through clothing choice has been indicated in several experimental studies. For instance, Grammer et al. (2004) found that women's short-term sexual motivation predicted their use of sheer clothing in a nightclub, while Durante et al. (2008) demonstrated that women desired to wear more revealing and sexy clothing for a night out if they were closer to ovulation and had a higher desire for a short-term encounter. Hence clothing choice, in particular contexts, may be used as a means of attracting a short-term mate by signaling sexual availability.

The signaling of sexual exclusivity may also be an effective mate attraction tactic in certain contexts. Chastity in women is a desirable trait for a long-term romantic partner, since this signals a woman is unlikely to seek extrapair partners, and may also offer men protection against pre-relationship cuckoldry (partnering with a woman who is very recently pregnant by another man). Bleske-Rechek and Buss (2006) found that

women (and men) high on sexual restrictiveness both self-reported and had a friend report, they used sexual exclusivity as a mate attraction tactic.

Variation in Mate Attraction Tactics

Mate attraction tactics in women vary as a function of a number of factors. Different strategies are likely to be deployed dependent on whether a short-term or a long-term mate is the desired target. Variations in mate value and socio-economic status across individual women also predict concomitant variations in the mate attraction tactics employed. Within individual women, fluctuations in hormone levels that occur over the menstrual cycle (for naturally cycling women) may also impact mate attraction tactics.

Sexual Strategies Theory

Sexual strategies theory (Buss & Schmitt, 1993) dictates that short-term and long-term mating strategies have divergent costs and benefits, depending on the context of their employment. Given the higher minimum obligate parental investment for women (Trivers, 1972), the costs incurred for females pursuing a short-term mating strategy can greatly outweigh the costs incurred by males. For women a short-term mating strategy may be deployed when immediate resources are required (effectively a short-term arrangement, exchanging brief sexual access for valued resources, during which it is not necessarily in the woman's ultimate interests to fall pregnant, Buss & Schmitt, 1993), or when genetic input from a male is desired without ongoing resource commitment (such as when a woman is already partnered, but is seeking to diversify the genetic portfolio of her offspring). Long-term mate-attraction strategies are likely to be deployed by single (or partnered) women seeking a (new) long-term mate. To signal differential availability or desire, the attraction of a mate for either a short-term or a long-term encounter is likely to employ different tactics.

There are certain mate attraction tactics that are perceived as being more successful in one context over another. For instance, Schmitt and Buss (1996) demonstrated that mate attraction tactics that signal sexual availability are perceived as most effective when used by women in a short-term context. On the other hand, signals of sexual exclusivity were deemed most effective when used by women in long-term contexts. Similarly, the use of appearance enhancement tactics may be differentially motivated or have different effects depending on the context of their use. Wagstaff (2018) found that frequency of makeup use was correlated with a long-term strategy, but the amount of makeup applied on any given occasion was correlated with a short-term strategy in women. The use of red clothing has long been purported to relate to mate attraction. In a study conducted by Niesta Kayser et al. (2016), female participants who anticipated they would interact with an attractive male wore red significantly more often than those who anticipated interacting with an unattractive male. Hence, mating motivation and context may alter the mate attraction tactics used.

Mate-Value

Another individual difference which is correlated with the use of mate attraction tactics is self-rated mate-value. Mate-value refers to one's perception of where they rank in the mating market, relative to same-sex others, and thus an inherently intrasexually competitive construct. Self-perceived mate-value largely comprises the extent to which an individual perceives that they are a "good catch" who possesses the qualities the opposite sex desires in a mate. Increased self-perceived mate value can impact the mating tactics that one employs. Intrasexually competitive individuals are more likely to mate poach (i.e., lure an already partnered person away from their mate) if they are also high in mate value (Arnocky, 2020). High mate-value individuals also report that sending unsolicited explicit images to members of the opposite sex is more acceptable than do low mate-value individuals

(March & Wagstaff, 2017). In both these studies, though, these effects were not exclusive to women, with no sex differences revealed.

Self-rated mate-value can also affect anticipated mate strategy use in response to an imaginary change in sex ratio. Millar et al. (2019) had participants read an article that primed an imaginary male-biased or female-biased sex ratio on college campuses, and then had participants indicate their future sexual strategies. While high mate-value women pursued a restricted sexual strategy, women who were low in self-rated mate-value indicated they would pursue an unrestricted sexual strategy, and this effect was stronger when presented with an unfavorable sex ratio. Since sexual strategy will impact the mate attraction tactics employed, it is reasonable to assume the employment of different mate attraction tactics in this scenario.

Socio-economic Factors

Various socio-economic factors have been identified as impacting mate attraction tactics, some of which differentially affect men and women. As operational sex ratios change, access to resources between the sexes changes, or threat and pathogen loads change, it is necessary to change one's preference for traits to maximize reproductive benefit. For instance, Lee and Zietsch (2011) showed that women primed with pathogen prevalence showed a higher preference for genetic quality traits such as muscularity and intelligence, over good dad traits, such as kind and nurturing, compared to women primed with resource scarcity, in a hypothetical mating scenario. Since women's mate attraction tactics depend on their pursuit of short-term or long-term mating, their mate attraction tactics are also likely to change under different socio-economic circumstances. In demonstration of this, Arnocky et al. (2014) showed that women (and men) exposed to a mate scarcity prime were more willing to aggress against a mate-poacher, while Arnocky et al. (2022) found that women low in envy used self-

promotion as an intrasexually competitive tactic when exposed to resource scarcity prime.

Economic equality can also impact mate attraction tactics. In a large study across 25 countries, Kolesnyk et al. (2021) found that gender equality increased sex differences in deceptive self-presentation on social media. In this study, as gender equality increased, deceptive self-presentation decreased overall, but a sex difference emerged where women deceived at a significantly higher rate than men (all things being equal when gender equality was low). In a similar study, Blake et al. (2018) found that expressions of sexualization in women, that is, "sexy selfies" and physical appearance enhancement, are positively associated with income inequality, as distinguished from gender inequality. Blake et al. found the effect of income inequality was stronger in developed nations compared to developing.

Summary and Conclusion

The taxonomy of mate attraction tactics has been deduced by several researchers, primarily Buss, and includes a range of tactics relating to appearance enhancement, flirting, and signaling of sexual availability or unavailability. Since the tactics perceived as most effective are dependent on the mate preferences of the opposite sex, women's mate attraction tactics differ from men's in their higher focus on physical appearance and signals of sexual availability. Women's mate attraction tactic use is dependent on sexual strategies (short term or long term) and individual variation in mate-value, and may also be influenced by cyclical changes in fertility. Socio-cultural factors may impact mate attraction tactic use, including gender and economic inequality.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Makeup](#)
- ▶ [Mate Manipulation, Intrasexual Competition](#)
- ▶ [Mate Value: Intrasexual Competition](#)
- ▶ [Physical Appearance: Intrasexual Competition](#)

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