General Background

- Around the world, men and women are similar in some of the characteristics they prefer in a long-term romantic partner (e.g., affection, honesty, and kindness) and different in others (e.g., men often prefer more physical attractiveness in their partners, and women more often prefer men who prioritize dominance and status).1, 3, 4
- Discussions of mate preferences often focus on the characteristics men and women seek in a partner; however, the characteristics most avoided may be even more important. Negative characteristics can have a strong harmful effect on fitness; hence, men and women should psychological adaptations that guide them to avoid fitness-compromising characteristics in a partner even more strongly than they pursue fitness-enhancing characteristics.2
- In fact, gender-differentiated priorities manifest in characteristics individuals most avoid in a long-term romantic partner; for example, men trade off status and resources in a partner more often than women do in order to have a physically attractive mate.3 Men more than women also respond more critically to information about a potential mate’s physical attractiveness when framed negatively rather than positively, and women more than men respond more critically to information about a potential mate’s earning potential and ambition when framed negatively rather than positively.4
- The current studies are designed to build on previous research. In Study 1, we compare the strength with which young adults pursue positive mate characteristics to the strength with which they avoid negative mate characteristics. We also compare gender differences in the pursuit of positive mate characteristics with gender differences in the avoidance of negative mate characteristics. In Study 2, through forced choice options, we systematically document the positive traits the sexes most prioritize and the negative traits they must avoid.
- Our guiding hypothesis was that, given the fitness costs of poor mating decisions, gender differences in the avoidance of negative attributes (such as “unattractive” and “lazy”) would be even more robust than previously documented gender differences in the pursuit of positive attributes (such as “attractive” and “hard-working”).

Study 1: Continuous Ratings of Positive and Negative Characteristics

![Figure 1: Men's and women's mean preference rating for each category of positive mate characteristics. Error bars represent ±2 SEM. Asterisks denote statistically reliable sex differences.](image1)

![Figure 2: Men's and women's mean avoidance of each category of averse mate characteristics. Error bars represent ±2 SEM. Asterisks denote statistically reliable sex differences.](image2)

- In study 1, we utilized previous literature,1 and an act nomination procedure to generate a comprehensive list of 76 positive attributes and their parallel negative counterparts.
- The positively framed mate preferences questionnaire asked participants (N=109) to consider a potential long-term mate, and, recognizing that no one can “have it all,” rate each of the 76 positive attributes on a scale of “I don’t need this in a partner” (0) to “I absolutely must have this in a partner” (5).5
- The negatively framed mate aversions questionnaire asked participants (N=106) to consider a potential long-term mate and, recognizing that every individual comes with drawbacks, rate each of the 76 negative attributes on a scale of “I could deal with this” (0) to “No, this is an absolute deal-breaker” (5).
- The 76 attributes were categorized into 14 major themes, as seen in the graphs on the left. As revealed by a comparison of the dashed lines, and contrary to our expectations, participants tended to more strongly prefer the positive attributes (M=3.5) than avoid the negative attributes (M=3.0).
- As predicted, gender differences in avoidance of negative traits were far more pronounced than gender differences in preference for positive traits. That is:
  - As shown in Figure 1, women more than men preferred a hardworking and wealthy/high status partner; men more than women preferred a creative and domestic partner.
  - As shown in Figure 2, women more than men avoided an unreliable, cold/unfeeling, uncultivated, lazy, unreflective, submissive, poor/low status, and unambitious partner. There were no items in this portion of our study that men avoided significantly more than women.

Study 2: Forced Tradeoffs of Positive and Negative Characteristics

![Figure 3: The number of times participants chose each trait as more important in a mate, when pitted against each of the other traits. Error bars represent ±2 SEM. Asterisks denote statistically reliable sex differences.](image3)

- In study 2, we began with 11 core traits and their negative counterparts (e.g., smart/stupid, good-looking/ugly). In a series of 55 trade-off questions, we pitted each trait against each one of the other traits.
- In the positive framing of the questions, participants (N=211) were asked which was better as a long-term mate, someone who was “X” (positive trait) but “Y” (negative trait), or “Y” (positive trait) but “X” (negative trait). An example is shown below.

**What type of person is BETTER as a long-term romantic partner?**

- Smart BUT Ugly
- Good Looking BUT Stupid

- In the negative framing of the questions, participants (N=189) were asked which was worse as a long-term mate, someone who was “X” (negative trait) but “Y” (positive trait), or “Y” (negative trait) but “X” (positive trait). An example is shown below.

**What type of person is WORSE as a long-term romantic partner?**

- Ugly BUT Smart
- Stupid BUT Good Looking

- As shown in Figure 3, in the positive frame, women more often than men traded off other positive traits to obtain a mate who was thoughtful, polite, and family-oriented; men more often than women traded off other positive traits to obtain a mate who was good-looking and smart.
- As shown in Figure 4, in the negative frame, women more often than men settled for less positive traits to avoid a partner who was disloyal; men more often than women settled for other negative traits to avoid a partner who was ugly or stupid.

Figure 4: The number of times that participants actively avoided each trait in a mate by opting for a different negative trait it was presented. Error bars represent ±2 SEM. Asterisks denote statistically reliable sex differences.

General Discussion

- In two studies, we investigated men’s and women’s self-reported pursuit of positive traits, relative to their avoidance of the negative counterparts of these traits, in a potential long-term partner.
- Across the studies, both sexes showed strong preferences for reliability (loyalty), warmth, and thoughtfulness in a partner, relative to other traits; and both sexes avoided the negative counterparts of these traits.
- Contrary to expectation, Study 1 participants did not avoid negative traits more strongly than they pursued positive traits. We believe there may be many factors at play in explaining participants’ relative lack of concern about negative characteristics, such as inflated optimism among young adults about their likelihood of finding, attracting, and keeping a long-term partner who has few, if any, character flaws. The sexes differred predictably. Women in Study 1 preferred a mate who was hard-working and of high status more than men did. Women also avoided many negative attributes more strongly than men did, including a partner who is lazy, submissive, of low status, and uncultivated.
- Contrary to effects documented in past studies, men in Study 1 did not report a stronger preference than women for a physically attractive partner, nor did men rate unattractiveness as more of a deal-breaker than women. However, in Study 2, when participants were forced to choose between traits, men more often than women traded off other positive traits to obtain a mate who was good-looking, and men more often than women settled for other negative traits in order to avoid a partner who was ugly; these effects were the largest we observed across the two studies, and they demonstrate that for men more than for women, attractiveness is a necessity more than a luxury.

References


Acknowledgements

We thank all those who participated in our studies and CRSP for supporting our research, and for providing us with valuable feedback. Special thanks to the many professors across campus who assisted in recruitment for our surveys by allowing us into their classrooms and sending our electronici to their students.