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This paper examines how variation in goal motivation affects men’s interest in high-status products in a mating environment. In two experiments we demonstrate that men display a higher interest in high-status products after seeing pictures of sexily, rather than plainly, dressed women (study 1) and more readily noticed high-status products in visual displays when a nearby female was sexily, rather than plainly, dressed (study 2). The effects are restricted to single men, suggesting that the acquisition or consumption of a high-status product functions as a mate attraction mechanism.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

With the purpose of catching and holding consumers’ attention advertisers often make use of sexually provocative images (Dahl, Sengupta, and Vohs 2009). Given that 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 Dettmann 2003) in order to draw consumers’ attention and to increase sales.

The current research examines 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. In Study 1, single men (N=24) and men in committed relationships (N=39) were exposed to 15 pictures of women. 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 clothing. After exposure, participants filled in the prestige sensitivity scale (Lichtenstein, Ridgway, and Netemeyer 1993). Participants indicated higher interest in high-status goods in the mating cue condition (M = -.68, SD = 1.02) than in the control condition (M = .98, SD = .64). Single men indicated higher interest in high-status goods in the mating cue condition (M = .33, SD = 1.08) than in the control condition (M = 1.20, SD = .68), (t(59) = 2.52, p = .01). For committed men, 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). 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.

In Study 2, single men (N=72) and men in committed relationships (N=61) were shown ten visual displays on a computer screen. Each display consisted of the pictures of six different products: five functional products (e.g. a desk lamp) and one high-status product (e.g. a Breitling watch). Each display remained on screen for one second. After a display disappeared, participants had 20 seconds to write down as many products as they had seen on the screen. Before engaging in this visual display task, we exposed the participants to a female experimenter who either wore sexy clothing (mating cue condition) or plain clothing (control condition). Sexy clothing should temporarily trigger the goal of displaying social status. In turn, this heightened goal of displaying social status should render high-status goods in the visual display more salient than functional products (Moskowitz 2002). We therefore hypothesized that men in the mating cue condition would notice the high-status goods more than men in the control condition. In addition, we expected this difference to be obtained for single men only.

Overall, a higher proportion of high-status goods (M = .36, SD = .16) than of functional products (M = .32, SD = .05), (F(1, 129) = 6.91, p = .01) was claimed by single men. However, participants in the mating cue condition (M = .38, SD = .15) recalled a higher proportion, but not significantly so, of the high-status products than participants in the control condition (M = .34, SD = .16), (t(131) = -1.60, NS). The pattern for functional products was reversed (M_{mating cue} = .31, SD = .06 vs. M_{control} = .33, SD = .05), (t(131) = 2.34, p = .02). The elevated attention for high-status products was obtained for single men only (F(1, 129) = 4.42, p = .04). Single men recalled a higher proportion of the high-status products in the mating cue condition (M = .43, SD = .17) than in the control condition (M = .33, SD = .15), (t(129) = 2.80, p < .01). In contrast, committed participants recalled almost the same proportion of high-status products in both conditions (M_{mating cue} = .33, SD = .13 vs. M_{control} = .35, SD = .17), (t(129) = 43, NS). Conversely, single men recalled more of the functional products when exposed to the control condition (M = .34, SD = .06) than to the mating cue condition (M = .31, SD = .06), (t(129) = 1.92, p = .06). Participants with committed relationships recalled not significantly more of the functional products in the control condition (M = .33, SD = .04) than in the mating cue condition (M = .31, SD = .05), (t(129) = 1.31, NS). Study 2 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. Apparently, the presence of a sexy dressed female set off a process of heightened automatic attention for luxury and status-evoking products in single men.

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). 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.

REFERENCES


