What a Feeling! Touching Sexually Laden Stimuli Makes Women Seek Rewards

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Tactile sexual primes affect women’s economic decision-making. Similar to the effects found in men, touching a pair of boxer shorts leads to monetary craving (study 1), and erodes loss aversion for money and food (study 2) in women. These effects were not observed when touch was prevented (study 3).

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Previous literature seems to have established that women’s economic decision making, contrary to men’s, is virtually insensitive to the presence of sexual cues. For instance, while men are more impatient for monetary rewards (Wilson & Daly, 2003), take more financial risk (Baker & Maner, 2008) and spend more on conspicuous consumer goods (Griskevicius et al., 2007) when visually exposed to a sexually attractive member of the opposite sex, the same studies show that women’s economic decisions remain unaffected after having been primed with potential mates.

In the present paper, we argue that the specificity of the sexual primes used so far (i.e., mostly visual ones) may have caused women’s unresponsiveness to sexual cues when engaging in economic decision-making. We will use other types of sex cues than the ones that have been used previously to study the effect of sexual cues on women’s economic decisions. Specifically, we show in three experiments that touching sexually laden stimuli changes women’s financial decisions.

Actively touching objects or stimuli seems to have an especially strong influence on preferences and decisions (Peck & Shu, 2009). For instance, Peck and Wiggins (2006) found that adding a touch element such as a sample of fabric on a pamphlet requesting donations to a local charity organization increased the impact of the message as measured by the time and money people wanted to spend on the organization. Peck and Shu (2009) showed that the endowment effect also occurs by merely touching—rather than actually possessing—a product. These findings are explained by the suggestion that touch facilitates a person’s affective reaction towards a stimulus. That is, the affective qualities of stimuli seem to be transmitted efficiently when the product is touched. Derived from previously observed effects of sex cues on economic decision making in men (Van den Bergh, Dewitte, & Warlop, 2008), we predict that touching sexually laden stimuli will lead to a craving for monetary rewards (Study 1) and a decline in monetary loss aversion (Study 2) in female consumers. We further expect that these effects will not occur if women are prevented from touching the sexually laden stimulus (Study 3).

In the first experiment, we asked female participants to evaluate either boxer shorts (“sex cue condition”) or a T-shirt (“control condition”) on eight dimensions (such as quality, fabrics,…). Next, they engaged in a discounting task and indicated the amount of money they would require in one week [two weeks/one month] to make them indifferent between receiving €15 now and receiving this other amount later. We hypothesized that women who touched boxer shorts rather than a T-shirt would require a larger amount to compensate for the delay. Consistent with our hypothesis, we found that touching boxer shorts rather than a T-shirt led to a craving for monetary rewards in women. These results are in line with the findings of Van den Bergh et al. (2008) who have shown that touching a bra rather than a T-shirt increases delay discounting for monetary rewards in men.

In the second study, we investigated the breadth of this sexual priming effect. Similar to the manipulation in experiment 1, we asked participants to evaluate either boxer shorts or a T-shirt. Next, loss aversion (i.e., the pain of losing a specific amount / the pleasure of acquiring an equal sized amount) for both money and food was measured (Li et al., 2012). The denominator of the loss aversion ratio captures one’s craving for monetary rewards (see DV Study 1). Participants were asked to indicate the amount of money [truffles] they would be willing to risk losing in a dice gamble (i.e., “If the eyes indicate one, two or three, you win €5 [200gr], if the eyes indicate four, five or six you lose €____ [___gr]”) (Harinck et al., 2007). Based on this data, loss aversion could be determined for both rewards. Consistent with the findings of the first study, results show that touching boxer shorts rather than a T-shirt erodes women’s loss aversion for both money and food.

In the third study, we explicitly manipulated whether women could touch the sexually laden stimulus. That is, participants were either asked to rate a pair of boxer shorts put in front of them to touch or put in a fully transparent cubicle of Plexiglas. Subsequently, women’s impatience for monetary rewards was measured using the same DV as in study 1. Our analysis revealed that women’s monetary craving increased when the sexually laden stimulus was touched. In sum, in line with previous findings obtained in men, we showed that touching boxer shorts led to a monetary craving and an erosion of loss aversion for both money and food in women. We are the first to show that priming women with sexually-laden cues affects women’s financial decisions (in a similar way as men’s). These findings may seem surprising from an evolutionary psychological perspective (Buss, 1989). Specifically, whereas sexual motives should instigate men to show off their (financial) resources, women should

Table 1: Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>STUDY 1 Area Under the Discounting Curve</th>
<th>STUDY 2 LN (Loss Aversion Money)</th>
<th>STUDY 2 LN (Loss Aversion Food)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control Condition</td>
<td>0.87 (0.13)</td>
<td>0.58 (0.14)</td>
<td>0.45 (0.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex Cue Condition</td>
<td>0.78 (0.15)</td>
<td>0.06 (0.15)</td>
<td>-0.11 (0.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test</td>
<td>F(1, 40) = 5.00, p &lt; .05</td>
<td>F(1, 48) = 6.22, p = .02</td>
<td>F(1, 48) = 4.37, p = .04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>STUDY 3 Area Under the Discounting Curve</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visual Sex Cue Condition</td>
<td>0.84 (0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tactile Sex Cue Condition</td>
<td>0.72 (0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test</td>
<td>F(1,39) = 5.97, p &lt; .05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
primarily invest in physical attractiveness (e.g., by dieting). One potential explanation for our findings is that women primed with sex cues want to acquire money to spend it on beauty products (Wilson and Daly, 2003). Another possibility however is that money, besides being a means to gain access to various resources, is regarded as a primary reward or reinforcer in itself, and that being effectively primed with sex makes consumers (both men and women) more susceptible to any type of reward. Our findings with respect to food-related decisions are consistent with this second interpretation. The second interpretation is also consistent with the existence of a “general reward circuitry” in the brain (Van den Bergh et al., 2008). Specifically, drive states that are activated by one type of cue (e.g., sex) can be satiated by rewards from seemingly unrelated domains (e.g., money and food) because various rewards are processed similarly. Hence, if touching sexually laden cues activates the reward circuitry of women, financial and food-related decisions are affected. We call upon future research shedding more light on these issues.

REFERENCES


