Confidence is sexy and trainable: Evidence from initial, opposite-sex interactions

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Abstract-Summary

Objective: We investigated whether men's social confidence in an initial, opposite-sex chatting context can be improved through a video tutorial and the extent to which being perceived as socially confident results in being seen as more romantically desirable and worthy of future contact.

Method: Women chatted with men who had received or not received a tutorial on how to handle speed-dating chats (Study 1: N = 129; Study 2: N = 60) or with male targets selected for having high versus moderate confidence in handling initial, opposite-sex encounters (Study 3: N = 46).

Results: Tutorial-trained men felt more confident going into the chats and they, as well as male targets selected for their confidence, were perceived by female chat partners to be higher in social confidence, status, and dominance. However, only perceptions of social confidence were further associated with being perceived as more romantically desirable (as a short-term mate) and worthy of future contact.

Conclusions: Findings indicate that social confidence is trainable and that other-perceived social confidence can impact the outcomes of social interactions.

Keywords: attraction, evolutionary psychology, mate selection, short-term mating, social confidence

Introduction, main ideas

Movies, self-help books, websites, and seminars promote confidence as an important trait to have in winning over potential mates, friends, and clients. Despite all the popular attention given to confidence, however, the scholarly literature has tended to overlook this topic. So, we asked:

- How does confidence affect social outcomes?
- Does social confidence come naturally, as fictional characters seem to suggest, or can it be trained?

We proposed that social confidence evolved to be seen as an honest signal of one's capabilities, which include the ability to garner resources and effectively deal with people. Accordingly, people respond positively to those who display confidence in social situations. We hypothesized that:

1) Men's confidence can be boosted through training on how to view and approach interactions in a mating context, and
2) Confidence will be perceived as romantically desirable.
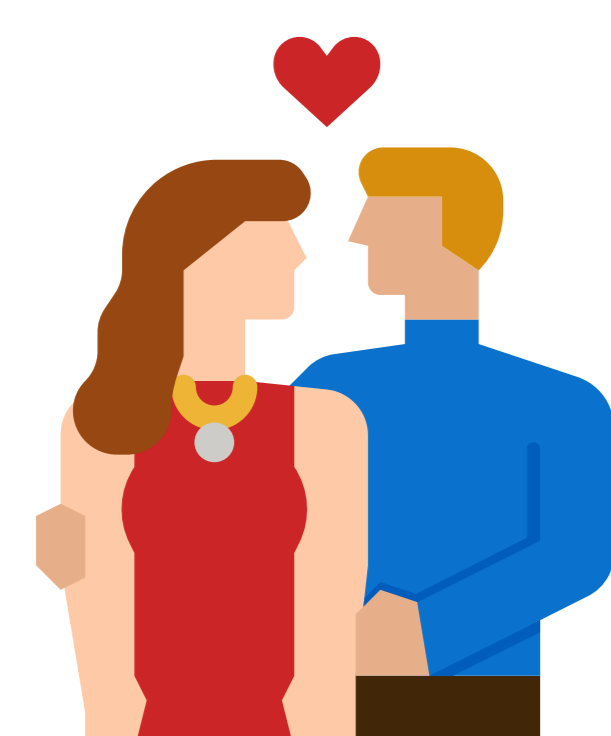
Methods

Study 1
Participants
- 68 male and 61 female undergraduates from separate equally prestigious universities

Materials

Two 3-hr videos designed by a dating skills company
- → *General conversation video* – describing typical conversation structures, and providing advice on keeping conversations going and holding more personal conversations
- → *Speed dating video* – covering similar topics as the general tutorial, but including additional recommendations on creating attraction in brief speed-dating conversations

Procedure
- Male participants randomly assigned to watching 1) the speed dating video, 2) the general conversation video, or 3) nothing (control)
- Different sets of 6 male participants—two from each of the three conditions—chatted individually with a different set of up to six female participants
- Participants rated their partners on social confidence, social dominance, social status, and romantic desirability after each session

Study 2
Participants
- 60 male undergraduates from a major university
- 3 female fourth-year undergraduates were invited to be raters

Procedure/Materials
- Participants were randomly assigned to watch videos identical to those in Study 1.
- Different sets of 3 male participants – one from each of the three conditions – chatted individually with each of the 3 female raters
- Raters rated participants on social confidence, dominance, status, romantic desirability, and interest in having future contact ("yessing") with these participants after each session

Study 3
Participants
- 46 female undergraduates from a major university

Procedure/Materials
- The study was posed as a free speed-dating event to people who recently completed a dating-skills training program, and people who were interested in but had yet to attend the training program
- 4 men were selected from each group to serve as targets
- Trained targets felt more confident than untrained targets in their ability to obtain positive outcomes in speed-dating encounters

- Male targets were randomly assigned to female participants who were either told 1) their chat partner had undergone dating-skills training, or 2) had not undergone any training (irrespective of their actual training)
- Female participants individually chatted with a set of four male targets who represented the 2 (self-confidence) x 2 (training knowledge) within-subjects conditions
- Participants rated their male date-targets on social confidence, trustworthiness, and romantic desirability after each session
- They also indicated which two men out of each set they most preferred for a long-term relationship and a short-term relationship

Results/Main Findings

Study 1
- Men who viewed the speed-dating tutorial were perceived as having higher social confidence, dominance, and status, compared to men in the control condition
- Men in the speed-dating tutorial condition were perceived as significantly more romantically desirable than those in the general tutorial and control conditions
- Perceptions of social confidence mediated effects of the tutorial type on romantic desirability
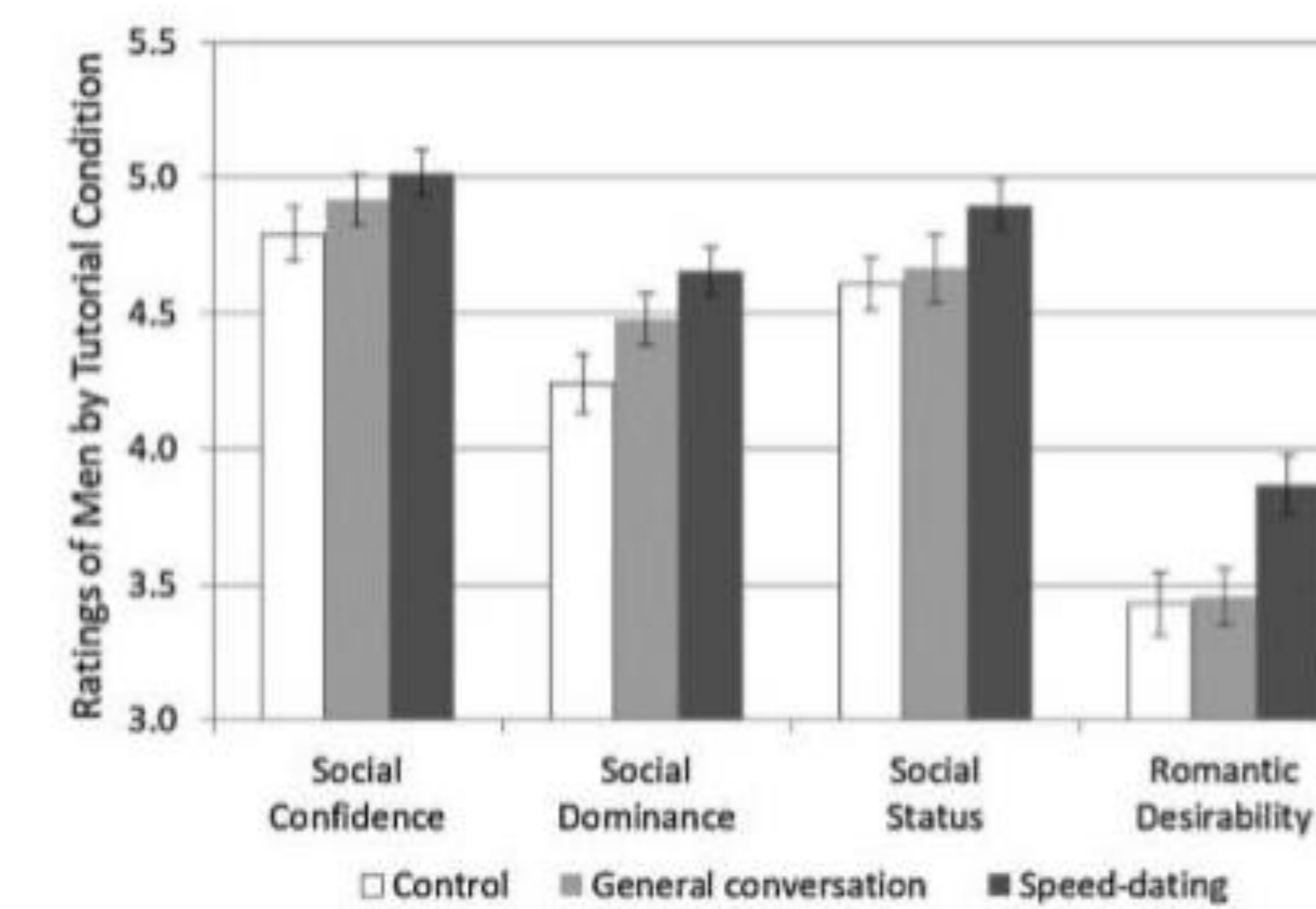
Study 2
- Men in the speed-dating tutorial condition were perceived as having higher social confidence, dominance and status, compared to those in the control condition
- Men in the speed-dating condition were perceived as more romantically desirable than those in the general tutorial, who were more romantically desirable than those in the control conditions
- Perceptions of social confidence mediated the effects of the tutorial type on romantic desirability
- Men in the speed-dating and general conversation conditions were yessed by female raters more than those in the control condition
- Perceptions of social confidence mediated the effects of the tutorial type on yessing
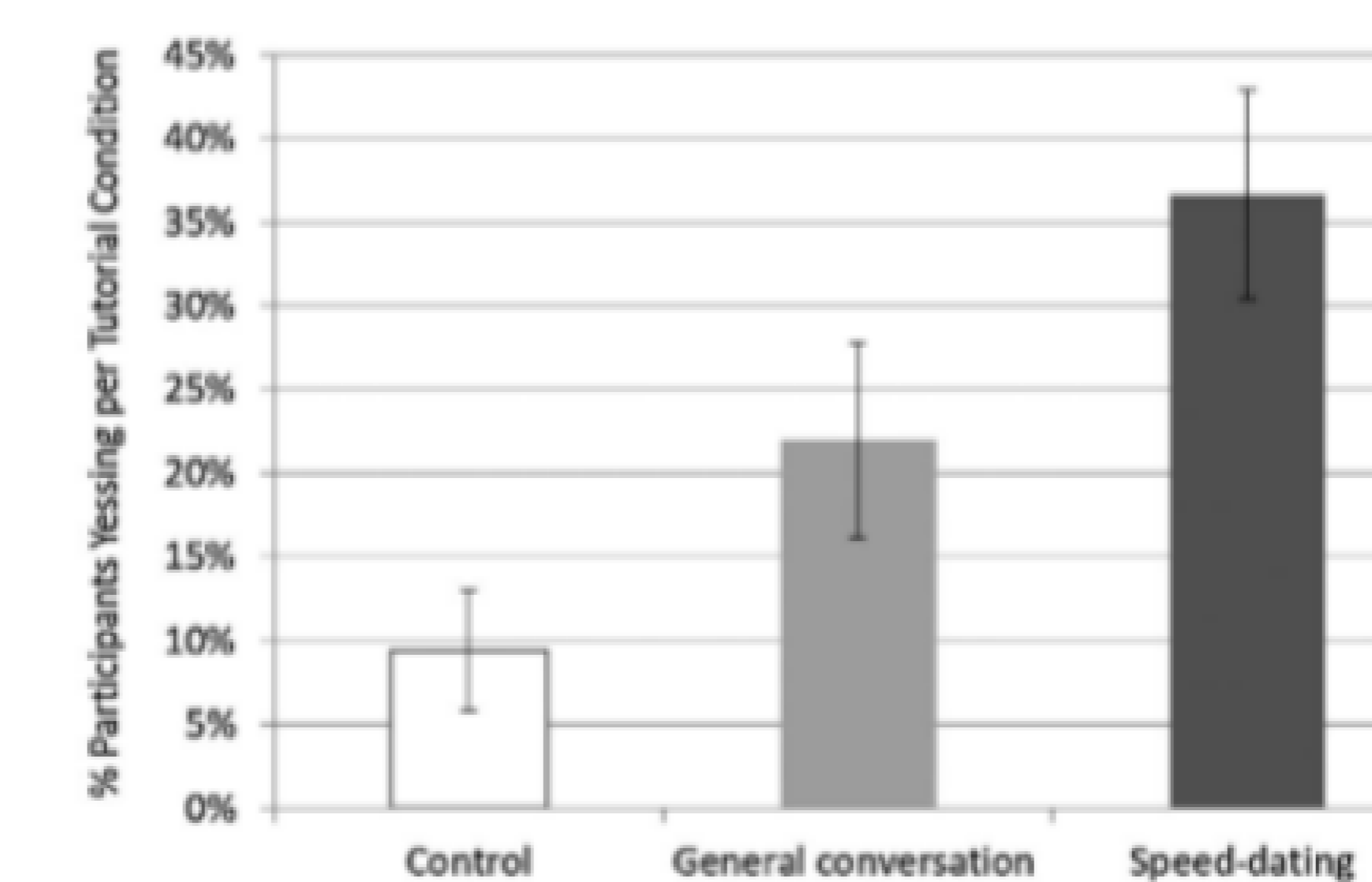

Study 3
- Self-confident male targets were perceived as more socially confident and romantically desirable than non-confident targets
- Targets labeled as having received training were perceived to have more social confidence and lower trustworthiness compared to targets labeled as untrained
- Female participants expressed lower romantic desirability for targets labeled as having received training compared to targets labeled as untrained
- Perceived social confidence mediated the positive effect of self-confidence on romantic desirability, and the negative effect of training knowledge on romantic desirability
- Trustworthiness mediated the negative effect of training knowledge on romantic desirability

Results/Main Findings (Cont.)

Relationship partner choice
- For short-term relationships, female participants preferred self-confident targets to non-confident targets
- → Perceived social confidence mediated the positive effect of self-confidence on short-term mate choice
- For long-term relationships, female participants preferred men who were labeled as untrained more than men who were labeled as trained
- → Trustworthiness mediated effects of training knowledge on long-term mate choice
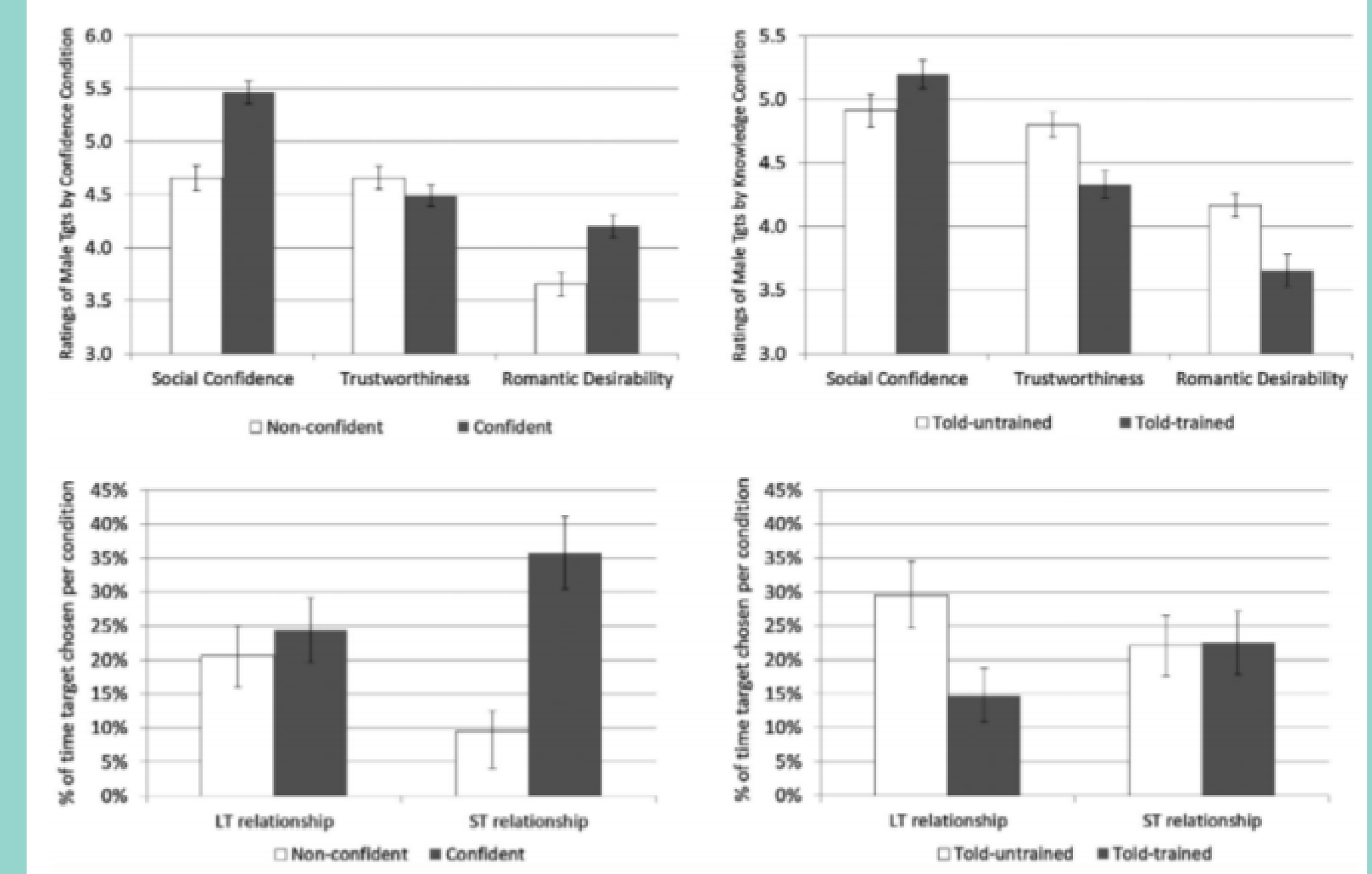
General Discussion

Across three studies, results indicated that tutorial-trained men felt more confident going into the chats and they, as well as male targets selected for their confidence, were perceived by female chat partners to be higher in social confidence, status, and dominance. However, only perceptions of social confidence were further associated with being perceived as more romantically desirable (as a short-term mate) and worthy of future contact. As such, findings indicate that at least for men in a romantic context, social confidence may be trainable and that other-perceived social confidence is indeed sexy and may impact the outcomes of social interactions. Findings are also consistent with overall perspective that confidence in evaluative social situations evolved to be viewed as an honest signal of one's abilities for that social domain.

Additional Information

Reference:
Li, N. P., Yong, J. C., Tsai, M.-H., Lai, M. H. C., Lim, A. J. Y., & Ackerman, J. M. (2020). Confidence is sexy and it can be trained: Examining male social confidence in initial, opposite-sex interactions. *Journal of Personality, 88*, 1235-1251.

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