

# Looks and status are still essential:

## Testing the mate preference priority model with the profile-based experimental paradigm

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### Overview

“In this country, you gotta make the money first. Then when you get the money, you get the power, then you get the women.”  
—Al Pacino, *Scarface*

“I don't understand how a woman can leave the house without fixing herself up a little—if only out of politeness. And then, you never know, maybe that's the day she has a date with destiny. And it's best to be as pretty as possible for destiny.”  
—Coco Chanel

**Objective:** This study drew from two paradigms:

- (1) the **mate preference priority model** (MPPM), which emphasizes that some romantic partner traits are necessities (non-negotiables) while others are luxuries (good-to-haves), and
- (2) J. M. Townsend's **profile-based experimental method**, which uses profiles comprising **photos** of pre-rated models to manipulate physical attractiveness (PA) + costumes and descriptions to manipulate social status (SS)

to address two gaps in MPPM and other mate preferences research:

- (1) the over-reliance on non-ecologically valid text labels
- (2) the lack of applications/relications of the profile-based method across cultures/generations

**Method:** Singaporean participants (Study 1  $n=431$ , Study 2  $n=964$ ) judged the short-term (ST) and long-term (LT) mating desirability of opposite-sex profiles varying on PA and SS. We also tested whether treating these variables as ordinal or continuous would be more valid.

**Results:** Results showed broad support for evolutionary predictions of mate preferences and priorities while revealing an increased premium placed on social status in our sample

**Conclusions:** The current research provides the first non-label, profile-based test of the MPPM, a well-powered replication of the profile-based paradigm, and an opportunity to observe the robustness and variations of mate preferences in a non-Western culture.

### Concepts

#### Sex Differences in Mating Preferences and Strategies

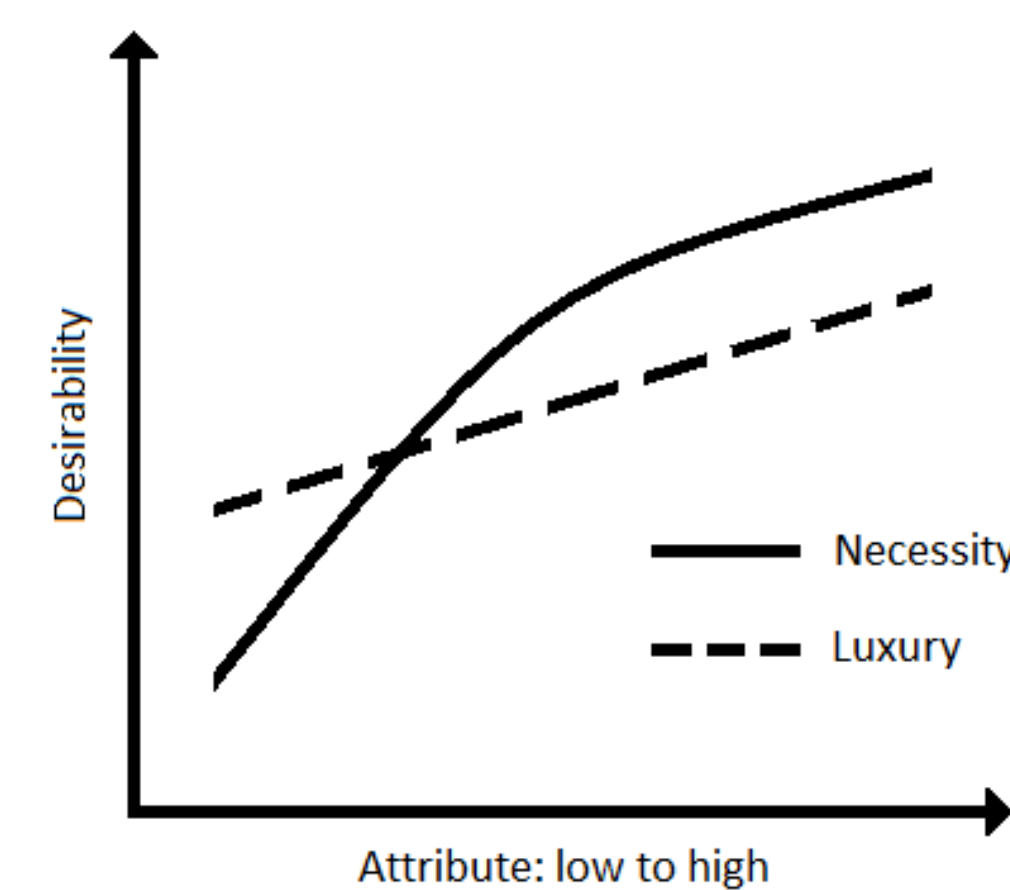
Sex-differentiated mating preferences stem from differences between men's and women's fertility timespans and minimum obligatory contributions to reproduction (Symons, 1979) such that men evolved to find physical cues to fertility (i.e., youth, sexual maturity) especially attractive, whereas women evolved to more strongly value SS given its instrumentality for resource acquisition (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). These sex-differentiated preferences vary according to relationship context. For LT relationships, women (vs. men) place higher value on SS whereas men (vs. women) place higher value on PA (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). In contrast, for ST relationships where partners are not anticipated to commit, women's preferences converge with men's to value PA (indicative of good genes; Li & Kenrick, 2006) over SS whereas men continue to strongly value PA (Thomas et al., 2020).

#### Mate Preference Priority Model

The MPPM emphasizes the minimum levels of critical attributes that people prioritize in romantic partners (Li et al., 2002, 2013), thus highlighting not only *between-sex differences* but also *between-attribute differences occurring within individuals*. If a woman's PA indicates her level of fertility—a quality that is essential for reproduction (Buss & Schmitt, 1993)—then it would be adaptive for men to prioritize at least a moderate level of PA in any relationship context before considering other attributes. Likewise, if a man's SS indicates his ability to have resources that were critical to survival in ancestral times, then it would be adaptive for women to prioritize in their long-term mates a moderate level of SS before considering other attributes. As a steady flow of resources is less relevant in ST contexts, women might benefit more from having a ST partner with good genes. Therefore, although women prioritize SS in LT mates, they may prioritize a moderate level of PA for ST partners. Attributes that are critical and thus prioritized are termed *necessities*, whereas attributes that contribute to overall desirability but are acquired only after necessities have been obtained are termed *luxuries*.

### Concepts (cont.)

Li et al. (2002) devised a budget allocation methodology to observe how people make trade-offs between necessity and luxury attributes. Participants are presented with attribute terms or labels (e.g., PA, SS, kindness, industriousness, creativity) and given a limited number of “mate dollars” that they allocate to those attributes to construct their ideal mate. When given a low budget for LT relationships, men prioritized PA whereas women prioritized SS (Li et al., 2002); for ST relationships, both men and women prioritized PA over SS (Li & Kenrick, 2006). As budgets grew, sex differences in the LT context generally disappeared and participants allocated more points to luxury attributes.



Although the MPPM has been supported by replications and extensions using this methodology (e.g., Mogilski et al., 2014; Thomas et al., 2020), it has so far been tested almost exclusively with this single method that, like most other mate preference studies, uses text labels to represent attributes which carry a low degree of realism and may encourage participants to choose based on what is socially desired.

#### Townsend's Profile-Based Experimental Method

Townsend's profile-based experimental method (Townsend & Levy, 1990a, 1990b; Townsend & Roberts, 1993) uses three male photographs and three female photographs: one of each depicting low, moderate, and high PA, and three realistic descriptions: one of each conveying three different levels of SS (working, middle, and upper-middle class) to examine attribute preferences in an ecologically valid manner. Participants viewed opposite-sex target profiles made up of these photographs and descriptions in a  $3 \times 3$  factorial design and rated their interest in the target individuals across different stages (e.g., LT vs ST) of romantic relations. This approach revealed sex-differentiated preferences for both partner PA and partner SS that corresponded with evolutionary predictions of mate preferences (Townsend & Levy, 1990b; Townsend, 1993). While profiles have been used to study people's judgments across various domains (e.g., Lee et al., 2014; Tornquist & Chiappe, 2015), the profile-based approach is underutilized in mate preference research (only two Dutch studies have used it to investigate the differential effects of PA and SS in mate choice, albeit with design modifications and specific research foci that limit the extent to which they can be considered replications; Ha et al., 2012, 2010). Moreover, the original studies were conducted about three decades ago and has not been tested on samples beyond the West.

### Study and Hypotheses

#### The Current Study

Despite the utility of the profile-based method as an ecologically valid platform, the lack of ecological tests of the MPPM, and the centrality of the concept of trade-off thresholds in both lines of work (Li et al., 2002; Townsend, 1993), the profile-based paradigm and the MPPM have not been researched in conjunction. Considering these various issues, a test of the MPPM using the profile-based methodology on an East Asian sample addresses two major developments in mate preference research and constitutes a timely endeavor to tackle several major gaps.

### Hypotheses

#### Hypotheses Based on Evolutionary Theories of Mating

##### Basic mate preferences 1—LT mating:

- (1a) PA (vs. SS) more strongly impacts men's ratings of potential mates' desirability whereas
- (1b) SS (vs. PA) more strongly impacts women's ratings.
- (1c) PA more strongly impacts men's (vs. women's) ratings whereas
- (1d) SS more strongly impacts women's (vs. men's) ratings

##### Basic mate preferences 2—ST mating:

- PA (vs. SS) more strongly impacts both (2a) men's and (2b) women's ratings of potential mates' desirability
- (2c) PA more strongly impacts men's (vs. women's) ratings whereas
- (2d) SS more strongly impacts women's (vs. men's) ratings

##### Comparing across long-term and short-term contexts:

- PA more strongly impacts both (3a) men's and (3b) women's ratings for ST (vs. LT) mates
- SS more strongly impacts both (3c) men's and (3d) women's ratings for LT (vs. ST) mates

##### MPPM 1—necessities in LT contexts

- PA (4a) is a necessity to men but (4b) not women
- SS (4c) is not a necessity to men but (4d) is to women

##### MPPM 2—necessities in ST contexts

- PA (5a) is a necessity to men and (5b) to women
- SS (5c) is not a necessity to men or (5d) to women

### Methodology

#### Materials

18 profiles comprising pre-rated photographs, dressing, and descriptions were created to vary factorially by sex (2: male and female), attribute PA (3: low, moderate, and high), and attribute SS (3: low, moderate, and high).



WK graduated with a BBA from Harvard Business School. While still in school, WK worked with two subsidiaries to raise US\$7.2 million to start the IT venture in Silicon Valley. He has since sold off that company for a substantial profit, returned to Singapore, and took up a position as the youngest Vice President in the regional office of Citibank, managing its \$120 million personal line portfolio. In his free time, WK enjoys golfing, tennis and team leadership workshops for youths.



LK completed her studies at the Nanyang Technological University and is now an employee of the fast-food restaurant 'Popeye's'. She is currently based at the Ang Mo Kio branch and works on all weekdays from 9am to 10pm. While she works in Singapore, her wages are fairly low. LK likes the most part of her job and she will not ever agree to change it in the future. She loves to watch TV and she likes to go back to her father's school.

#### Procedure

Participants rated how desirable they perceived each target to be as (a) ST mate and (b) LT mate (1 = very undesirable; 7 = very desirable).

#### Study 1 Participants

431 undergraduates ( $M_{age} = 22.04$  years,  $SD_{age} = 1.72$ , 53.4% females)

#### Study 2 Participants (replication with larger sample)

964 undergraduates ( $M_{age} = 21.99$  years,  $SD_{age} = 1.77$ , 51.7% females)

### Results/Main Findings

	Supported?	
	Study 1	Study 2
<b>Basic mate preferences 1—LT mating:</b>		
(1a) PA has a greater impact on men's judgments of desirability than does SS	No	Yes
(1b) SS has a greater impact on women's judgments of desirability than does PA.	Yes	Yes
(1c) PA has a greater impact on men's (vs. women's) judgments of desirability	Yes	Yes
(1d) SS has a greater impact on women's (vs. men's) judgments of desirability	Yes	Yes
<b>Basic mate preferences 2—ST mating:</b>		
(2a) PA has a greater impact on men's judgments of desirability than does SS	Yes	Yes
(2b) PA has a greater impact on women's judgments of desirability than does SS	Yes	Yes
(2c) PA has a greater impact on men's (vs. women's) judgments of desirability	Yes	Yes
(2d) SS has a greater impact on women's (vs. men's) judgments of desirability	No	No

### Results/Main Findings (Cont.)

	Supported?	
	Study 1	Study 2
<b>Comparing across long-term and short-term contexts:</b>		
(3a) PA has a greater impact on men's judgments of ST (vs. LT) desirability	Yes	Yes
(3b) PA has a greater impact on women's judgments of ST (vs. LT) desirability	Yes	Yes
(3c) SS has a greater impact on men's judgments of LT (vs. ST) desirability	Yes	Yes
(3d) SS has a greater impact on women's judgments of LT (vs. ST) desirability	Yes	Yes
<b>MPPM 1—LT mating</b>		
(4a) PA is a necessity to men	Yes	Yes
(4b) PA is not a necessity to women	Yes	Yes
(4c) SS is not a necessity to men	Yes	No
(4d) SS is a necessity to women	Yes	Yes
<b>MPPM 2—ST mating</b>		
(5a) PA is a necessity to men	Yes	Yes
(5b) PA is a necessity to women	No	Yes
(5c) SS is not a necessity to men	Yes	Yes
(5d) SS is not a necessity to women	Yes	No

### General Discussion

The current research afforded a novel test of the MPPM using the profile-based mate preference paradigm, thereby providing the first application of this model without relying solely on simple attribute labels while replicating and extending earlier findings of both paradigms in an East Asian country. Two major sets of findings emerged:

- (1) Broad support for sex-differentiated mate preferences as predicted by evolutionary theory through the profile method, thus constituting a successful replication of Townsend et al.—increasing levels of PA had a stronger positive effect on men's (vs. women's) judgments of LT and ST mates, whereas increasing SS had a stronger positive effect on women's (vs. men's) judgments. For both sexes, a stronger impact was found for PA on the desirability of ST mates and SS on the desirability of LT mates.
- (2) Consistent with the MPPM, women treated SS but not PA as a necessity in LT contexts, while men treated PA as a necessity in LT contexts and SS as a luxury in ST contexts. Inconsistent with expectations, the more highly powered Study 2 showed that SS was also considered a necessity by men in LT contexts and by women in ST contexts.

The unexpected results show that SS was valued more highly than expected. The stronger preference for SS by participants in our study compared to those in related mate preferences studies (e.g., Li et al., 2002; Townsend, 1993; Townsend & Levy, 1990) may reflect the pace of economic development in Asia (Chang et al., 2011) and high cost of living in Singapore, as well as the greater concern that East Asians have with SS relative to other cultures (Yong et al., 2022).

Overall, the results broadly support our hypotheses and provide evidence that men prize and prioritize PA more than women do, and women prize and prioritize SS more than men do, and that these priorities vary to different degrees across mating contexts. Based on a sample that is both culturally and generationally distinct from those of the original studies that introduced the profile-based method (Townsend & Levy, 1990), sex-differentiated mate preferences and prioritization of certain attributes as necessities—in particular, when measured with an ecologically valid profile-based method—remain quite robust. Nevertheless, a few unexpected findings highlight the usefulness of considering priorities rather than simple preferences and point to the possibility that cultural factors may interact with evolved mate preferences to create some flexibility in what we value in relationships. But while cultural norms or living circumstances may skew mate preferences to some extent, the key attributes that have been essential to reproductive value throughout evolutionary history remain, to this day, at the core of mate preference psychology

