

**Egalitarian Dating Initiation: Men's View on Passive and Assertive Women**

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Traditional gender roles ask men to be dominant and women to be submissive. Such gender expectations also persist in the dating arena (Siegel & Meunier, 2019). Several studies show that men tend to be the date initiators in heterosexual relationships (e.g., Morr Serewicz & Gale, 2008; Odom, 2012). According to Pryor & Merluzzi (1985), in dating, men, much more than women, are expected to lead the conversation, decide what to do, or pick up their dates (as cited by Morr Serewicz & Gale, 2008). It seems that men's scripted social behaviors enforce their preference for staying dominant and assertive in relationships. However, it is unclear if staying passive could help women fulfill the submissive gender role desired by men. Although popular folk myths say that playing hard to get without showing affection will make a woman more wanted by men, some studies point out that men get deterred and turned away by indifferent women when considering them as potential mates (Dai et al., 2014). Do men actually enjoy passive women in a relationship who wait to be pursued? Or might they prefer assertive women who initiate the contact and openly express their affection? This study will look at how women's attitudes could impact men's evaluation of their sexual attractiveness. Moreover, the paper will compare men's preference for potential mates' responsiveness with the traditional gender roles of dominance and submission to determine whether men like active or passive women in a relationship. Throughout this study, it is found that rather than falling in love with passive women who are believed to fit in the submissive gender role, men prefer assertive women who initiate contact and express affection, indicating desirable traits such as sexual receptivity and femininity.

Before understanding what men want in women, it is important to understand social expectations on male-dominant dating. Ever since the 1970s, scholars have found that dominance

and submissiveness are gender-typed in nature in the relationships scripted for men and women (McCreary, 2001). Both the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ) (Spence et al., 1975) and the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974) show men being dominant and women being submissive as polarized gender roles (as cited by McCreary, 2001). These studies are consistent with the traditional sexual scripts that masculine men are socialized to initiate, while feminine women are restricted to be responsive, fulfilling their partners' demands (Gagnon, 1990; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1992; Schwartz & Rutter, 1998, as cited by Dworkin, 2005). Contemporary studies further show that men adopt and enforce the existence of gender roles in heterosexual relationships. According to Siegel & Meunier (2019), sexual activities are "acts of power" where the "dominant men conquer the submissive women" within the content of popular culture (p. 9). Moreover, Brown & Lewis (2004) find that men are more comfortable when their partner is subordinate and submissive (as cited by Greitemeyer, 2007). It is clear that most relationships follow the traditional social scripts, and men want women to fill in their gender role in the relationship.

As contemporary studies usually relate women's submissive gender roles with passivity (Jagolino, 2015), it seems that women should hide their affection to men and wait to be pursued. The passive attitude in dating relationships has a folk theory known as "playing hard to get," which has over 280 million searches on Google (Dai et al., 2014). Such a popular dating strategy of staying passive is not only adopted by women during their earlier encounters but also continues into their later dating stages like the discussion of future plans (Sassler & Miller, 2011). Simundza (2015) builds statistical models to show the effectiveness of playing hard to get to increase the likelihood of getting married. Simundza's study shows that playing hard to get is effective in increasing men's desire for women. Yet, the study only provides a brief description

of the phenomenon. Combining other scholars' studies on sexual power, one hypothetical reason women adopt passive dating strategies is that staying passive makes women fit better in the submissive gender role (Sassler & Miller, 2011). As men preserve power by staying dominant, women fear initiative behaviors will take power away from men (Sassler & Miller, 2011). Hence, women adopt passive dating strategies to avoid failing to satisfy men's wants for submissive partners.

However, when taking a close look at the passive dating strategy, it turns out that "playing hard to get" does not increase men's preference for partners. The study conducted by Dai et al. (2014) points out that playing hard to get could short-termly increase a man's desire in the woman but decrease his liking in her. The short-term wants from men are mainly because of the psychological effect known as "Sunk-cost Fallacy" (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981, as cited by Dai et al., 2014). This psychological effect states that because of loss aversion, people are more willing to endeavor the things once they have spent time or money (resources) on it, even if the continuation is not worth the spending any more (Parayre 1995). This cognitive pattern shows that deniability and attractiveness are independent, and men do not perceive women as more attractive after they play hard to get. Moreover, in Dai et al.'s study (2014), it is said that playing hard to get would only increase a woman's attractiveness if and only if she had shown particular affection to the man before, and that man is mentally committed. This condition means that the folk myth of "playing hard to get" does not initially make women more attractive. In fact, the whole folk theory requires women to engage with the interaction first with men (Dai et al., 2014), which actually indicates the importance of women's responsiveness rather than indifference in dating motivation. Besides, both studies conducted by Dai et al. (2014) and Simundza (2015) recognize the costs of playing hard to get, which are men's derailed desirability

in partners soon after women settle in relationships and a higher chance of short-life marriages. That being said, the strategy of staying passive in dating is unreliable as it fails to increase women's sexual attractiveness to men and is likely to lead the relationships to an earlier end than average.

If staying passive fails for women in dating, then will men's perception of women's sexual attractiveness increase if women show their assertiveness? Two decades ago, Seal et al. (2003) had studied men's attitude towards women's initiation in dating and found that the majority of men showed both dislike and negative feelings on women's assertiveness. Although Seal et al.'s (2003) conclusion seems to echo with men's stereotypical gender role of expectation on women, the study actually had methodological fallacy as they only asked men about their feelings without confirming their answer with the behaviors. Hence, it is still unclear if men prefer assertive women.

In order to observe men's attitude change regarding the increase of women's assertiveness, research needs to be conducted in the form of sequential or follow-up surveys on the same research objects. Individual research was conducted as a Google survey. This survey aimed to trace men's dating preferences based on their partners' behaviors. The questionnaire (shown in Table 1) asked participants to rate their feelings towards an imagined female acquaintance they met based on initial and following interactions. The girl would initially approach the men without any interaction and then gradually increase their intimacy from verbal and physical aspects. There were also a pair of questions in this questionnaire to test whether verbal assertiveness was more attractive to men than assertiveness in action. Additionally, the study collected participant's social interaction types of passive and active as a potential factor impacting men's rating at the beginning of the survey. Survey participation was voluntary, and

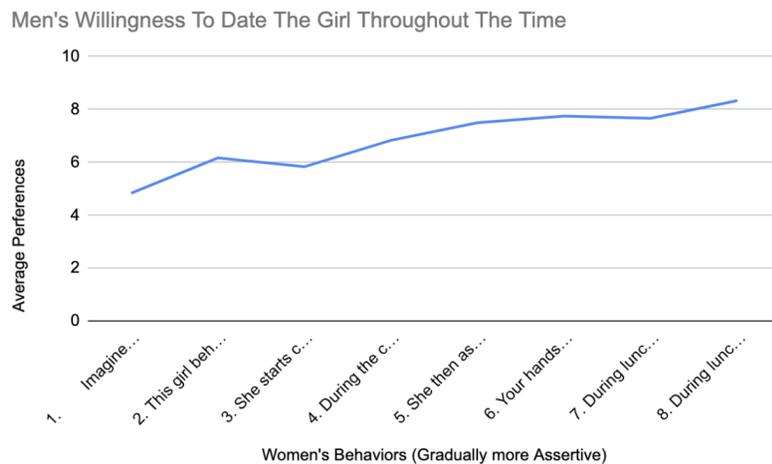
data collection was anonymous. Participants were allowed to withdraw from the research anytime during the survey. Twelve valid survey responses were collected from college male students who have experience in heterosexual relationships. Based on the study reviews done in the previous context, I hypothesized that men would rate women more attractive as women become more behaviorally assertive. However, due to the dominance-substance gender role, I expected that men would prefer verbal flirting to behavioral assertiveness in the interaction as verbal was considered less intimidating (Odom et al. 2012).

Table 1: Individual Research Survey Questions on Men's Feelings on Assertiveness in Women

	Survey Questions
1	In terms of your personality, do you usually reach out to others or do you prefer waiting for others to reach out to you?
2	Imagine on a regular day, you are waiting for lunch in the line on campus. There is a girl behind you. [Please rate your preference/impression to this girl by number scale from 1-10, 1=dislike, 10 = she's interesting, I consider her as a date]
3	This girl behind you asks you to pass something for her and says thanks to you with a smile. [Please rate your preference/impression to this girl]
4	She starts chatting with you and asks about your grade and major. [Please rate your preference/impression to this girl]
5	During the conversation, the girl tilts her head and looks up at you. [Please rate your preference/impression to this girl]
6	She then asks if you are willing to have lunch together. [Please rate your preference/impression to this girl]
7	Your hands accidentally touched together. Her face is flushed. She smiled at you but was shy. [Please rate your preference/impression to this girl]
8	During lunch, the girl says you are cute. [Please rate your preference/impression to this girl]
9	During lunch, the girl asks you if you are willing to come out next Sunday for a date. [Please rate your preference/impression to this girl]

After analyzing the survey results, it is found that the outcome meets the first part of our hypothesis, which is that men will rate women more attractive as women become more behaviorally assertive. Fig 1 shows that the rating of attractiveness linearly increases with

**Figure 1**



gradually increased assertiveness in women. This outcome is consistent with the past research done by other scholars. As Ames (2008) presented in the study, assertiveness is reflected by the ability to openly express one's feelings, self-promoting, and leading the conversation. Likewise, Odom et al. (2012) also examine the relationship between assertiveness and sexual attractiveness perceived by men and give a similar conclusion. By asking female participants to initiate talking in the interaction with direct attitudes, it is found in the research that women showing assertiveness makes them more attractive.

The reason behind the increased sexual attractiveness brought by verbal and physical assertiveness is because assertive women show men more cues of sexual receptivity. According to a recent study published by Blake et al. 's (2020), assertive women who have higher sexual

motivations are more willing to focus on themselves in the conversation in dating. Attractions are the determinant factors if a subsequent relationship will happen, and sexual motivation is the fundamental way to show affection (Birnbaum et al., 2012). Such a reason could explain why assertiveness increases women's attractiveness perceived by men. Stillman and Maner's (2009) study supported such an idea as they found that men can tell women's sociosexuality based on given video and photos. Neuro studies also provide sufficient evidence to explain the sexual-cues detecting mechanism. The study of Balfour et al. (2004) has found that the mesolimbic system of rats' brains could detect the sexual-induced cues and be stimulated by a sexually active environment. Such a finding shows that there is a high possibility that human brains could also sense the subtle sexual cues conveyed by others. The study conducted by Miller and Maner (2011) further convinces the idea of men being able to detect women's sexual motivation. The research looking at the relationship between women's ovulation and attractiveness shows that women are perceived as more attractive by men during the peak of their fertility (Miller & Maner, 2011). In the study, one essential factor for the increased attractiveness perceived by men is that women become more sexually available and more willing to initiate the conversation. The dependency between women's assertiveness and sexual attractiveness is also supported in the study conducted by Stillman and Maner (2009), where women with unrestricted sociosexuality are rated as more attractive. This is because these women are more likely to have an open attitude and straightforwardly express their affection to men. It is clear that these subtle or direct cues in the interactions indicating women's sexual motivation are constantly impacting men's feelings and women's images in their minds. Hence, by acting assertive and open, women are able to convey the message of their sexual availability to men.

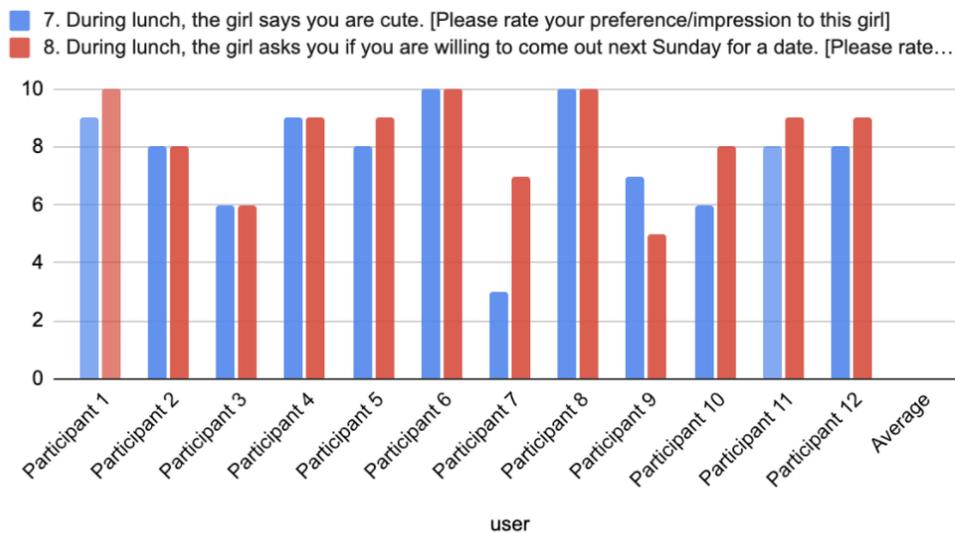
Another reason for men's preference for assertive and initiative women might be that these women know how to refuse unwanted sex properly. From the evolutionary aspect, men highly value the loyalty of their partners (Buss, 1994). According to Buss (1994), this is because, unlike women who have the biological privilege to confirm their babies are in their blood, men do not know if they are the biological father of their heirs. Hence, men prefer the chastity and virginity of women to reduce paternity uncertainty (Buss, 1994). Some scholars point out that assertive women with high sexual motivation will be less likely to maintain their virginity, which will make them less preferable by men (Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003). However, with the development of birth control like the condom in contemporary society, men value less of their partners' virginity (Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003). Although such a trend does not mean that men care less about their paternity, it does provide a possible explanation of why assertive women with high sexual motivation will not deter men. According to a study done by Noar et al. (2002), it is found that assertive women have a higher insistence on condom usage and are more likely to refuse unwanted sex. On the contrary, although passive women have low sexual initiation and motivation, they have higher chances to give permission to sexual activities and involve themselves in unwanted sexual activities (Goetz et al., 2012). Therefore, even though assertive women show more sexual motivation, their insistence on condom usage and overall assertiveness are more likely to assure men that they are the biological father of their children.

Although the outcome of the individual research conducted by this paper meets the first part of the hypothesis, the results do not meet the second part of my hypothesis, which is that men will rate subtle cues like shyness more attractive than behavioral assertiveness. After reviewing verbal assertiveness, the later section of the survey further looked at the situation where women's assertiveness was presented by their actions. Female-initiated dates, though they

seem to fit less into the traditional gender roles than verbal flirtatiousness, increases the attractiveness rating of women. As discussed by Odom et al. (2012), initiating dates and showing assertiveness to men will increase women's sexual attractiveness rather than decrease it. Looking at the survey result presented in Fig.2, when comparing the impact of verbal with behavioral assertiveness, the majority of the men rate women more attractive when women's assertiveness is directly presented through their actions. The average attractiveness score of women who praise men verbally is 7.67 out of 10, while the average score of women who straightforwardly ask men for a date is 8.3 out of 10, which is significantly higher than the former one. These studies surprisingly found that men, rather than being scared away from highly assertive women, actually prefer women's straightforwardness over flirtatious verbal cues.

**Figure 2**

*Comparison between the effectiveness of women's verbal initiation and behavior assertiveness in increasing their attractiveness rated by men.*



One explanation for such a phenomenon is that direct assertiveness in actions like dating initiation does a better job in ensuring men their partner's sexual responsiveness and femininity than verbal assertiveness. It is widely known that men have higher expectations on sexual involvement in the initial dating (Mongeau and Carey, 1996; Morr and Mongeau, 2004, as cited by Serewicz et al., 2008). Such a finding is also confirmed by the study conducted by Emmers-Sommer et al. (2010) as a significant increase shown in the sexual expectation if women initiate the date (as cited by Odom, 2012). This is because, based on evolutionary biology, men innately adopt a high interest in sex and prefer having more sexual activities or partners to increase reproduction success (Hagen, 1979; Kenrick, 1987; Symons, 1979; or Wilson, 1975, as cited by Clark and Hatfield, 1989). However, men also fear that they will be rejected and lose their sexual advances and prefer a female-dominated initiation (Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005). Hence, the reason why men rate female-initiated dating more positively is that men have higher confidence in women's sexual receptivity as women-initiation removes those uncertainties. Additionally, female initiation not only shows men their short-term sexual responsiveness but also increases their femininity from the aspect of long-term relationships. According to Birnbaum et al. (2012), direct assertiveness in dating-initiation also convinces men of women's communal interest. It is said that such signals will lead men to pursue the mates as long-term partners, which stimulate the sexual arousal of men and increase their perception of partners' sexual attractiveness; meanwhile, as men perceive these initiative partners as potential long-term mates, it is likely that they view these mates as more feminine (Birnbaum et al., 2012). Sarkova et al.'s (2013) study supports the ideas of the previous study. The study shows that how men perceive their partner's sexual attractiveness is determined by mates' femininity and their sexual arousal. Therefore, the

reason that behavioral assertiveness is sexually attractive to men may be because such traits indicate sexual responsiveness and increase men's perception of partners' femininity.

Throughout the analysis of the survey results along with other scholars' studies, what has been found is the shifts towards a more equalitarian pattern in the heterosexual relationship. Our survey reveals that active women know how to display their femininity, as they fit in the gender role better than passive women. Moreover, the finding challenges the traditional gender restrictions on the behavior and power of women. In fact, female-initiated dating is much more common than expected. According to Odom et al. (2012), 84.5% (out of 232 participants) of the female participants had asked out a man. This high percentage of female initiation indicates that the old dating mode of women staying passive may already become an outdated impression. Furthermore, in the same study, it is found that a lot of men do wish to shift from a male-dominated relationship to a more "equalitarian or female-dominated relationship" (155). Combining with what we have discussed in the previous section of this paper that women stay passive to avoid taking men's power away, it is time to question if such an oppressive expectation on women exists because of men's wants, or if it is just what women believed to be true.

Fifteen years ago, Tarana Burke started the famous #MeToo Movement to help millions of women who had been sexually victimized (Occam, 2018). However, even though more and more people start to avoid toxic masculinity and realize the importance of sexual consent, the action of seeking approval is still consciously or unconsciously genderized by men. Although dating and relationships are believed to be men's obligation among popular cultures, this paper intends to show that women and men have the same power to initiate interactions. By questioning the strategy of staying passive, this paper challenges the traditional gender roles

expectation on women and prompts the positive impacts brought by female assertiveness.

Moreover, by looking at men's and women's attitudes toward dating initiation, it is important to point out that men welcome egalitarian relationships. For women, speaking about their feelings and needs straightforwardly in a relationship should not be considered as a violation of men's power. Instead, it is a way for women to earn back their rights in the still generalized dating arena. With the rising awareness of gender equality evoked by movements like the #MeToo, women should feel comfortable to be assertive, to express their desires openly, and to bravely break the persistent gender stereotypes which suppress their feelings for too long.

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