

Evaluating Attractive Alternatives: The Moderating Influence of Mating Orientation on Susceptibility to the Blinders Effect

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Background

Our study extends previous research on the “blinders effect” and the “contrast effect” by examining both effects simultaneously. Past research has shown that romantically involved people find individuals of the opposite sex less attractive than do uninvolved people (Simpson, Lerma, & Gangestad, 1990). This “blinders effect” does not appear to be a function of participants’ own physical attractiveness. As expected, the effect is found to be most salient when the potential mate is a physically attractive, relevant target (Maner, Gailliot, & Miller, 2009). Miller (1997) also showed that relative inattention to attractive alternatives predicted the likelihood of relationship success. The blinders effect, which has been replicated in numerous studies, has been shown to operate at both conscious and subconscious levels (Maner, Gailliot, & Miller, 2009; Maner, Gailliot, Rouby, & Miller, 2007; Miller, 1997). These findings suggest that the blinders effect serves as a relationship maintenance mechanism.

The contrast effect, on the other hand, may work against relationship maintenance. It is the tendency for involved individuals to rate their partner as less attractive after having been exposed to desirable alternatives (Kenrick, Neuberg, Zierk, & Krones, 1994). For men, the effect appears after exposure to attractive women, and for women it appears after exposure to high status men.

We designed the current study to attempt a simultaneous elicitation of the blinders and contrast effects. To examine the blinders effect, we compared romantically committed and uncommitted participants’ ratings of photographs of highly attractive opposite sex targets. To examine the contrast effect, we assessed involved participants’ ratings of their own partners after exposure to either highly attractive or average opposite sex targets. We expected to find the contrast effect among men, in particular, because we manipulated physical attractiveness (not status) of the opposite sex targets. Finally, we assessed men’s and women’s long- and short-term mating orientations to assess their links with participant susceptibility to the blinders effect.

Method

Overview

A total of 152 (99 women) introductory psychology UWEC students participated in exchange for course credit. Using a cover story of psychology in advertising, participants rated photographs of opposite sex models. They then answered questions about their current relationship status and (if applicable) perceptions of their partner. Finally, they completed an abbreviated version of Jackson and Kirkpatrick’s (2006) mating orientation inventory.

Attractiveness Ratings

Photos were obtained from the website www.hotornot.com and were selected for their relevance as mating targets for our college-aged sample. Photos were pre-rated for attractiveness in a pilot study. Participants in the experimental condition viewed 11 attractive and 4 average models. The control condition consisted of 15 average models. Participants rated the models on ten-point scales for their attractiveness and (in keeping with our cover story) their perceived ability to sell a product.

Partner Perceptions

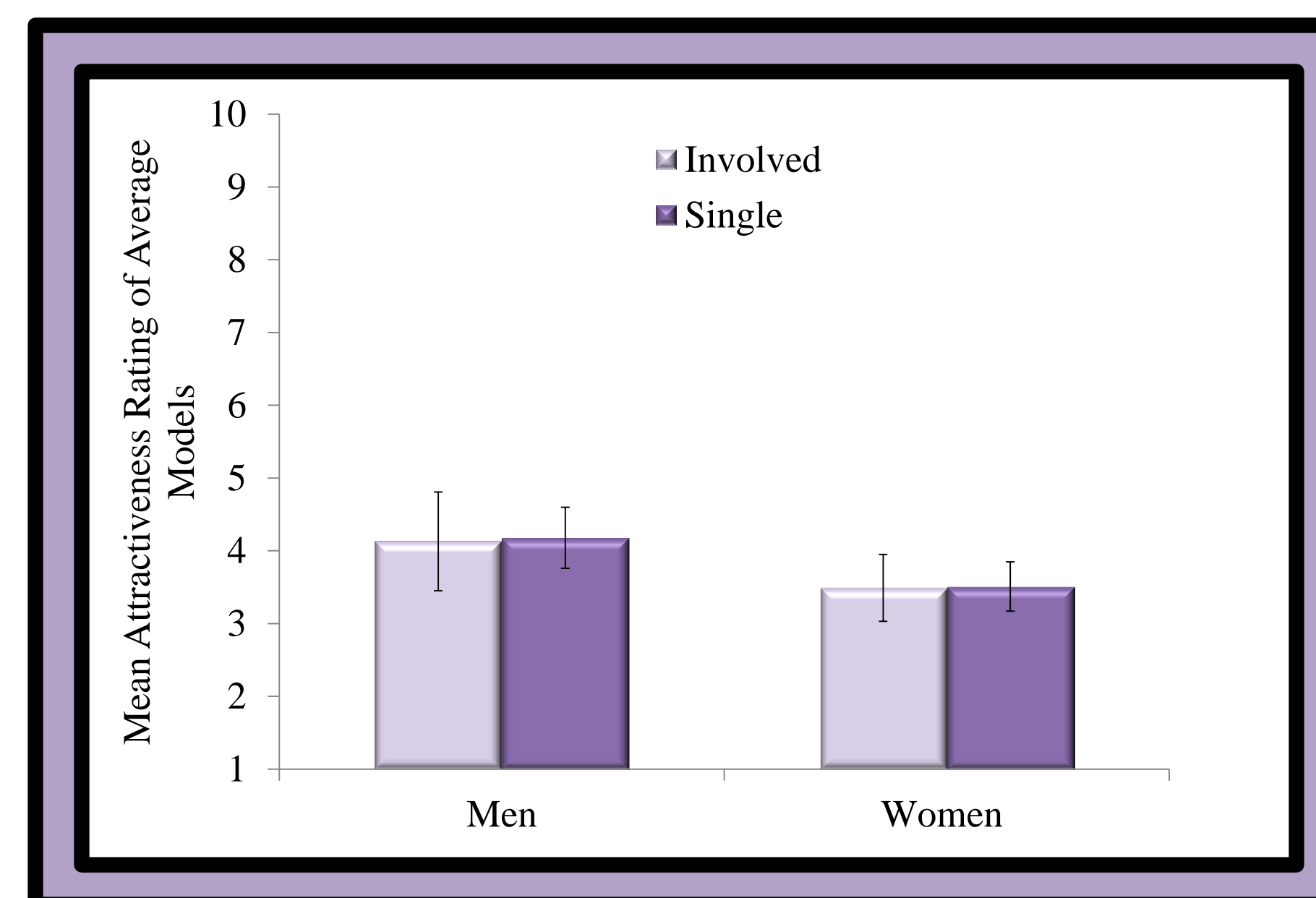
Participants in a committed relationship rated their partner’s comparative attractiveness and sexiness as well as their overall satisfaction with their sex life (on seven-point Likert scales) and the likelihood (as a percentage) that they would cheat on their partner. For subsequent analyses, we divided participants into either romantically involved or uninvolved. Further, involved individuals were divided into high or low commitment.

Mating Orientation

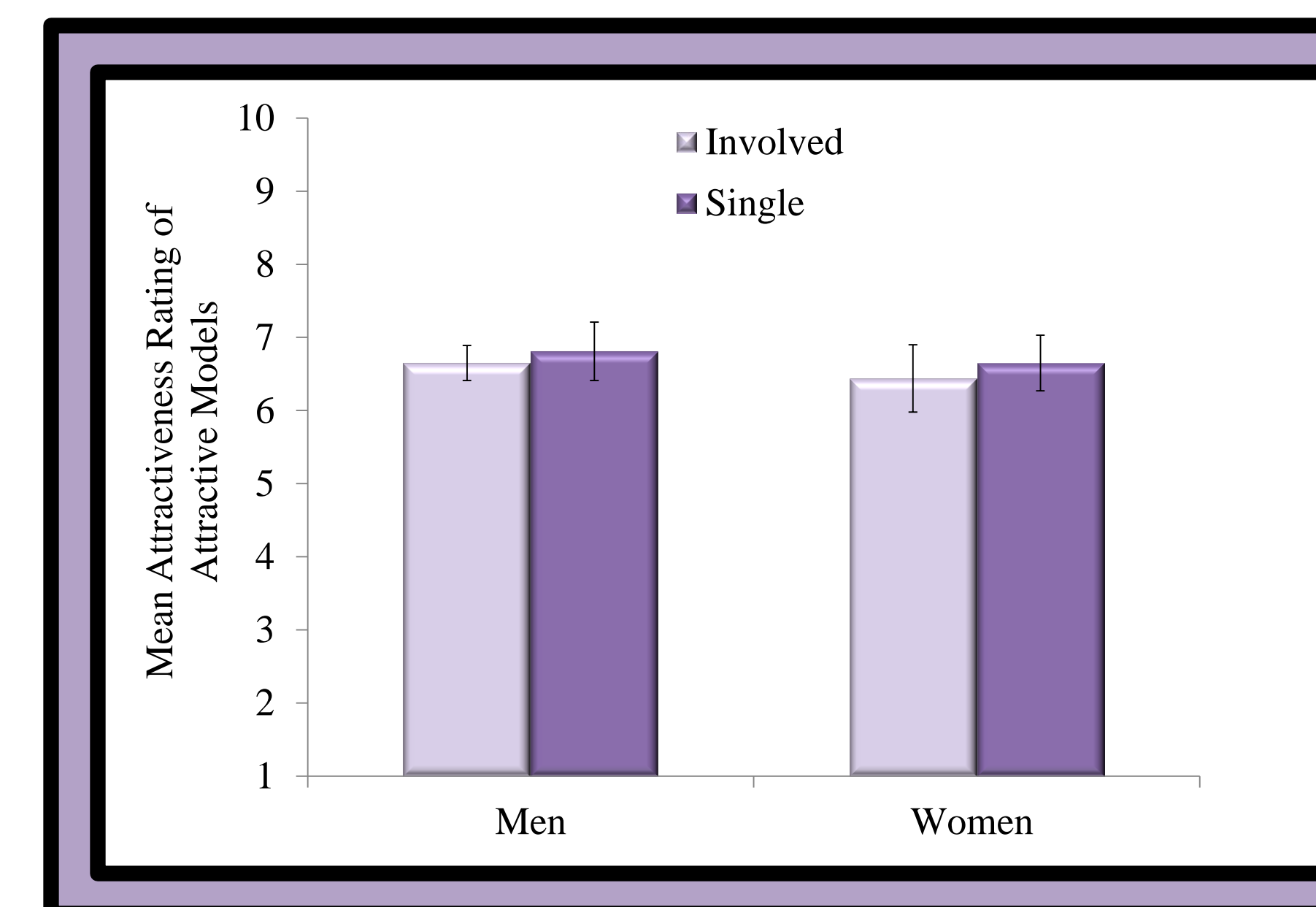
Scores on a mating orientation inventory were used to determine the extent to which participants were short-term oriented and long-term oriented. We used a median split to divide participants into either high or low short-term mating orientation (STMO) and high or low long-term mating orientation (LTMO).

Results

Blinders Effect

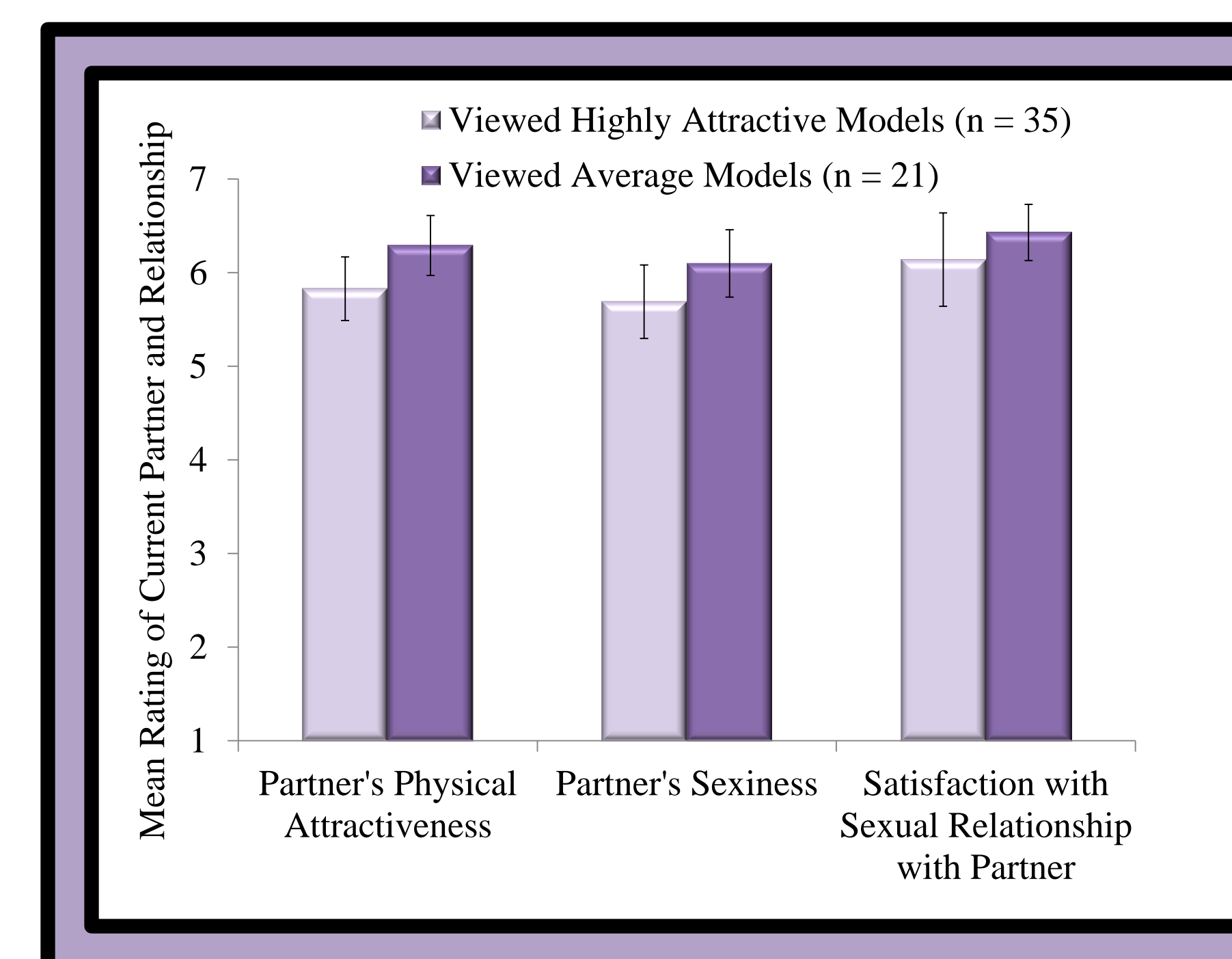


In previous research documenting a Blinders Effect, involved people and single people rated average members of the opposite sex as similarly attractive, but highly attractive members of the opposite sex as differentially attractive. In those studies, involved participants rated desirable highly attractive members of the opposite sex as less attractive than single people did. We did not replicate the effect for either men or women. Involved and single men rated highly attractive models as similarly attractive ($t(29) = -0.67, p = .51$), and involved and single women rated highly attractive models as similarly attractive ($t(60) = -0.71, p = .48$).

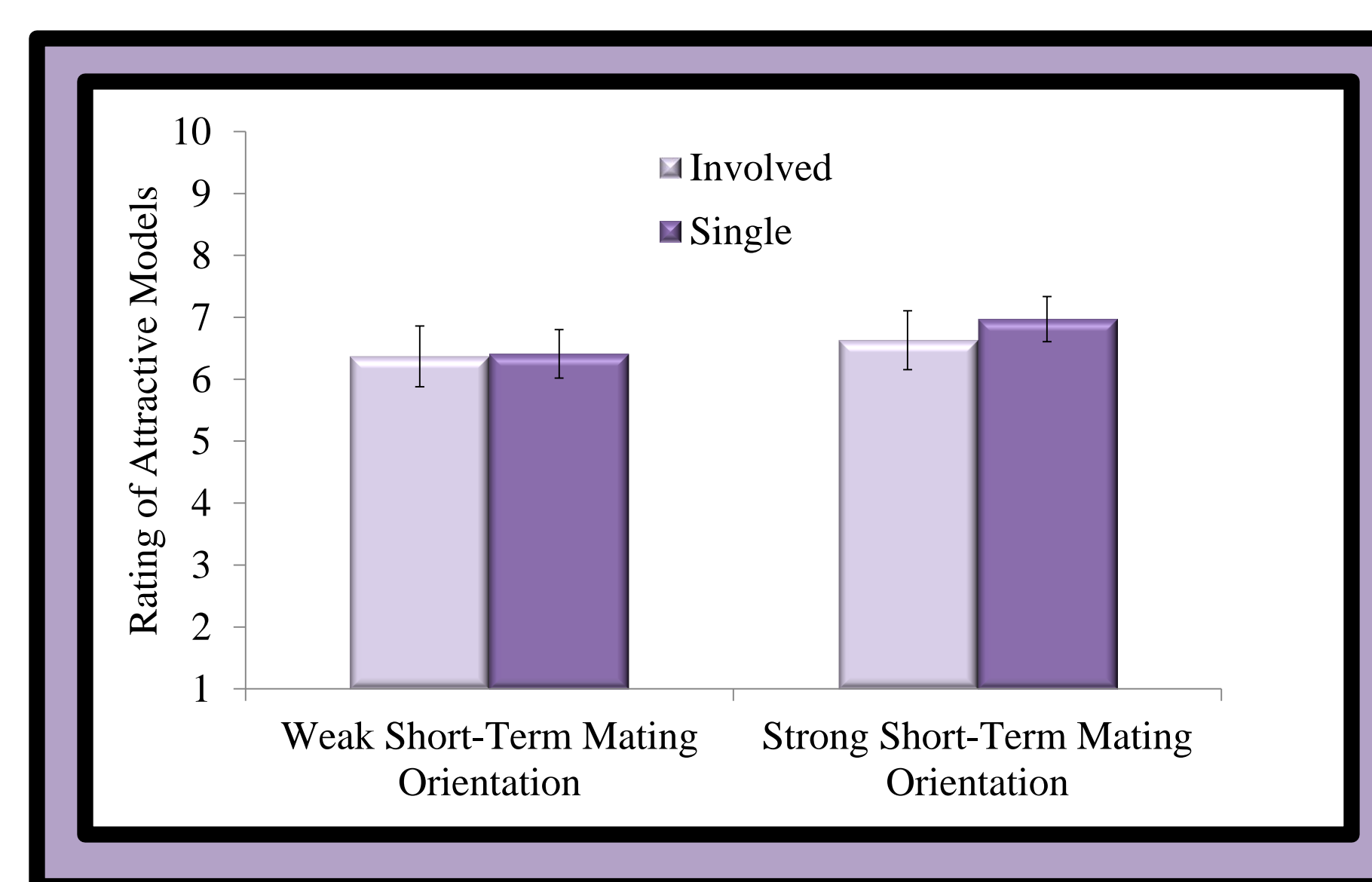


Contrast Effect

We also predicted a contrast effect, such that viewing pictures of highly attractive members of the opposite sex highlights the contrast between them and one’s partner. Thus, we hypothesized that, among those who were involved in a romantic relationship, those who viewed pictures of attractive models would report more negative (or less positive) perceptions of their romantic partner than would those who viewed models of average attractiveness. Because of a limited number of involved participants in the sample (41 women and 15 men), we combined the sexes for these analyses. They revealed only marginal support for a contrast effect. Although the trend was in the predicted direction for all three variables of interest, only one comparison reached marginal significance: Involved participants who viewed pictures of highly attractive models rated their own partner as marginally less attractive than did involved participants who viewed models of average attractiveness, $t(54) = -1.81, p = .076, d = -0.49$. Although not statistically reliable, they also rated their partner as less sexy, $t(52.12) = -1.54, p = .13, d = -0.42$.

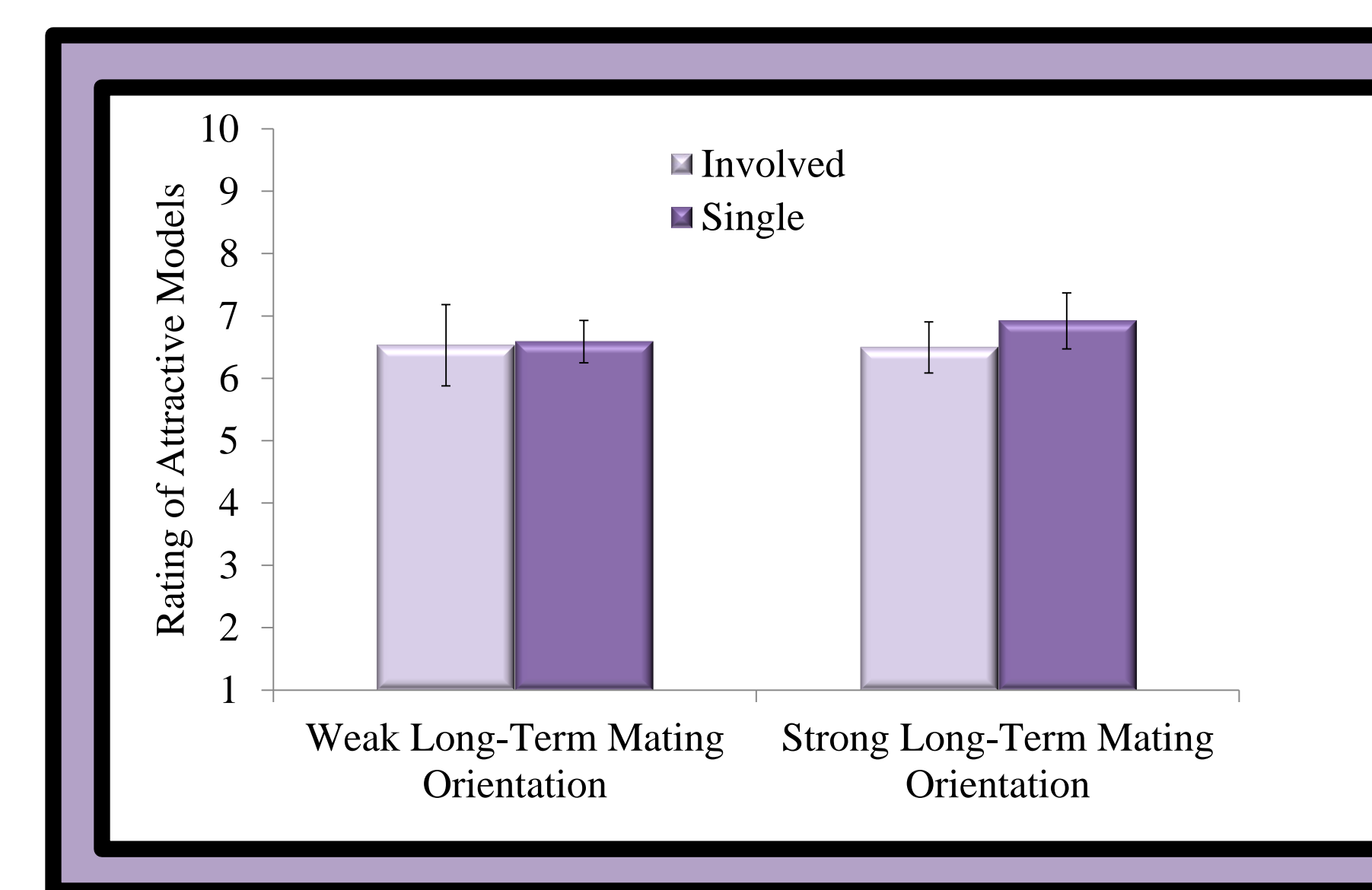


Moderating Effects of Short- and Long-term Mating Orientation



We predicted that people with a strong STMO would be *less* likely to display the blinders effect than would those with a weak STMO. As shown above (left), however, the blinders effect did not show up in either subgroup (weak STMO $t(42) = -0.12, p = .91$; strong STMO $t(47) = -1.07, p = .29$). There was a trend, across relationship involvement, for those with a strong STMO to rate the targets more favorably than did those with a weak STMO, $F(1, 89) = 3.56, p = .06, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .04$.

We expected that people with a strong long-term orientation would be *more* likely to display the blinders effect than would those with a weak long-term mating orientation. Despite extremely limited variability in LTMO in our sample ($M = 6.27, SD = 0.89$, on a 1 to 7 scale), we pursued these analyses. Even among those in the top half of the distribution of LTMO, there was no statistically significant difference in involved vs. single people’s ratings, $t(44) = -1.47, p = .15$. However, the effect size was small-to-moderate, $d = -0.44$.



Discussion

Our study is the first of which we are aware to test the blinders and contrast effects simultaneously. It also is the first to investigate short- and long-term mating orientation as moderating the blinders and contrast effects. We were unable to replicate the blinders effect in our sample; that is, romantically committed individuals rated attractive opposite sex targets no differently than did uninvolved individuals. We also did not observe a contrast effect in our sample; romantically involved participants did not devalue their partners after exposure to attractive opposite sex targets. Finally, we observed no moderating effect of mating orientation on either the blinders or the contrast effect.

Though our results did not support the existence of the two effects or a moderating influence of mating orientation, our findings should be interpreted with caution. First, a variety of researchers have been able to produce the blinders effect and contrast effect. The blinders effect has been elicited even in paradigms similar to ours in which the relationship threat is simply exposure to a photograph of an attractive alternative (e.g., Miller, 1997; Simpson et al., 1990). Second, our study was very limited by its small sample size; for example, we were forced to combine men and women in our analyses of the contrast effect because of a lack of romantically involved men and women. Finally, we observed very limited variability in participants’ long- and short-term mating orientations, further making it unlikely to find a link between mating orientation and susceptibility to the blinders or contrast effect.

A future attempt should be made to document both effects simultaneously, but with a larger sample. We maintain our prediction that the blinders and contrast effects will be observable simultaneously. A larger sample size will also better facilitate an investigation of mating orientation as a moderator of these effects.

Select References

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Acknowledgements

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