

# You say you don't care about dating a hottie?

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Stating that you don't care if you land a partner who is "hot" or "sexy" is relatively commonplace. But what people say they want and what they actually want are often two very different things when it comes to romantic attraction.

However, a new methodology that measures people's implicit, split-second responses gets around this problem. Research from Northwestern University and Texas A&M University measures whether people's implicit preferences actually predict how much you like the hotties.

"People will readily tell you what they value in a romantic partner," said Eli Finkel, associate professor of psychology at Northwestern and co-author of the study. "But study after study shows that those preferences don't predict whom daters are actually attracted to when they meet flesh-and-blood partners. Now we can get under the hood with this quirky [methodology](#) to see what people actually prefer in live-interaction settings."

Paul W. Eastwick, assistant professor of psychology at Texas A&M University and lead author of the study, says that the findings raise questions about the way we determine what people want in a partner.

"If a person tells me, for example, that she doesn't care about how attractive a guy is, our research suggests that her claim isn't worth all that much," Eastwick said. "Instead, it would actually be more useful to measure her reaction times on this new task."

Focused on [physical attractiveness](#), the implicit measure in this study was based on reaction times to various words flashed in the middle of a computer screen. Participants' task was to quickly sort synonyms of "physical attractiveness" with other words that they happen to like, such as tequila, or motorcycles, or romance novels. According to the researchers, the people who perform well on this task have a strong implicit preference for physical attractiveness.

Along with Eastwick and Finkel, other co-authors of the study include Alice H. Eagly, professor of psychology and faculty fellow in the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern, and Sarah E. Johnson, a doctoral graduate of Northwestern.

"In many cases, people's consciously stated attitudes and preferences predict their behavior quite well," Eagly said. "But in the case of attraction, people's implicit, unconscious preferences seem to do a better job."

A number of psychology studies reveal a disconnect between stated preferences for partners and actual choices. Most of the studies use explicit measures in which people consciously report what appeals to them in a partner. In this new study, the implicit measure that the researchers developed predicted how much the participants liked physically attractive potential partners, both at a speed-dating event and in a face-to-face interaction in the laboratory.

"People's reports of why they like certain partners might not be especially accurate," Eastwick said. "But that doesn't mean that romantic desire is random. The reasons might still be there, hovering just outside of conscious awareness."

The study, "Implicit and Explicit Preferences for Physical Attractiveness in a Romantic Partner: A Double Dissociation in Predictive Validity,"

appeared in the November issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Provided by Northwestern University

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