

Valentine's day a show of wealth for single men?

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Unmarried guys spend the most, signaling their fitness as mates, expert says

(HealthDay)—On Valentine's Day, single men are far more likely than married guys to splurge on a loved one, a marketing expert from Harvard Business School says.

Compared to men who have already tied the knot, unmarried fellows run up a 50 percent higher tab on gifts professing their admiration and devotion, his new small study finds.

"They are trying to signal their wealth to prospective partners," Michael Norton, an associate professor of marketing at Harvard who has researched who spends what on Valentine's Day—and why. Whether they are conscious of their intentions is unclear.

Studying 91 men and women, married and single, on the heels of

Valentine's Day 2010, Norton found single men spent \$81 on average. [Married men](#) shelled out \$51 on average and single women \$32. [Married women](#) parted with the least, just \$20.

What's up with unmarried guys?

They need to let the woman of their dreams know they're solvent, tapping into women's longstanding attraction for wealthier men, regardless of their own wealth or lack of it, according to Norton. "I give, therefore I have," is the theme of his as yet-unpublished report.

But that's only part of the story driving pre-Feb. 14 purchases, according to Norton.

Besides asking about their Valentine's Day outlay, Norton asked participants to report what he calls their "subjective wealth"—how well off they felt after spending on V-Day. They also revealed their monthly income and rated their satisfaction with the relationship.

Greater spending was linked with feeling wealthier, he found, even after taking into account the giver's income and [relationship satisfaction](#).

That finding echoes the results of some of his other studies, Norton said, which found that donating money to charitable causes is likely to make people feel better off and, in turn, happier. The thinking, he said, goes something like this: "If I can give money away, I must be doing OK." That's true even for those who are far from wealthy.

"Courtship gifts serve a similar wealth-signaling purpose as charitable giving," he said. A single guy displays his wealth by his generosity, and in the process signals wealth to his sweetheart and to himself, he said.

Could the unmarried man's spending be fueled at least a little by

anticipating his partner's joy? Norton can't say because his study was designed to evaluate such intentions.

The study findings come as no surprise to Vldas Griskevicius, associate professor of marketing and psychology at the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management.

"If he is finding this kind of thing happens closer to Valentine's Day, that would make a lot of sense," Griskevicius said.

"I find that men, especially single men, tend to signal wealth when they have romance on their mind," he said.

In one of his studies, he asked male college students to look at photos of beautiful women or beautiful architecture. "Later, men indicated how much money they would spend on various products such as a car, watch and vacation. The men who had looked at photos of women spent more money," he said.

The picture is different, Norton and Griskevicius agreed, for married men and their spouses.

"You wouldn't expect having romance on the mind to lead men in committed relationships to want to show off their wealth to others," Griskevicius said.

Norton's study confirms that. "Married men in general are spending less on their partners," he said, maybe because they've sealed the deal, "which is a little sad."

Norton suggests single women and married spouses who spend a little more this Valentine's Day might feel a little happier. That ties in with his previous research, in which he has found that the feelings of subjective wealth after gift-giving are soon followed by feelings of happiness.

But don't lose sleep over the findings of the new study. Until published in a peer-reviewed journal, data and conclusions are typically considered preliminary.

More information: The American Academy of Pediatrics talks about [healthy relationships for teens](#).

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