

# Reading the right sexual cues

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Both college men and women focus primarily on a photographed woman's nonverbal emotional cues when making snap decisions about whether she is expressing sexual interest at a particular moment in time. But their judgments also are based to a large degree on how attractive she is and the provocativeness of her attire. Physical attractiveness plays a much larger role in how college men than women make these quick judgments. Female students in turn tend to pick up more than men on clothing style and the woman's emotional cues. This is according to a study in the journal *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, published by Springer. Around 500 students were asked to give their first impressions about the current sexual interest of women in a series of photographs.

While quick assessments about sexual cues are part of the dating game, these are easily misinterpreted and in extreme cases may play a role in unwanted sexual advances and even rape. Through cognitive training, male students can however be taught how to "read" the right sexual cues better, says lead author Teresa Treat of the University of Iowa in the US.

The study was conducted among 276 female and 220 male college students to assess how they perceive women's momentary cues of possible sexual interest. Participants were presented with photographs of different women and had to express their first thoughts on whether the women showed sexual interest or not. Half of the participants received instructions beforehand on certain nonverbal emotional cues (such as body language or facial expressions) that help to gauge such matters better. All participants also completed an assessment about their attitudes towards rape.

The findings looked different among students who held more rape-supportive attitudes (as determined by their results from the assessment). These attitudes are hostile to rape victims, including false beliefs about rape and rapists, for example women enjoy sexual violence. Both males and females in this group, relative to their peers, relied less on the photographed [women](#)'s emotional cues and more on their attire and their attractiveness. This is problematic because appearance-related cues such as clothing and physical beauty are less accurate nonverbal signals of a woman's current (or momentary) sexual interest in a particular man than the woman's nonverbal emotional cues.

It was found that the students who received instruction on non-verbal cues before assessing the photographs were more likely to note [emotional cues](#) than aspects such as clothing and physical beauty when making their judgments. Receiving such guidelines also shifted the focus of students who held more supportive attitudes towards rape.

"The current work significantly advances our understanding of the operation and malleability of sexual-perception processes and their links to rape-supportive attitudes among both male and female college students," says Treat, who believes that cognitive training, including feedback on the accuracy of judgments, ultimately may play a useful role as part of sexual-assault prevention efforts.

Such training could also include aspects about the types of social settings associated with sexual advances, such as bars, house parties or in a bedroom rather than sidewalks, classes or office spaces. This is according to the findings of a recent study<sup>2</sup> in Springer's journal *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications* of which Treat was also the lead author.

**More information:** Teresa A. Treat et al, Effects of gender, rape-supportive attitudes, and explicit instruction on perceptions of women's

momentary sexual interest, *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* (2016). [DOI: 10.3758/s13423-016-1176-5](https://doi.org/10.3758/s13423-016-1176-5)

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