

Study finds women more competitive against strangers in games but still win more when playing their intimate partners

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A team of psychologists at North China University of Science and Technology's School of Psychology and Mental Health has found that

women tend to compete more ardently against strangers when playing social games than they do when playing against an intimate partner.

In their paper [published](#) in the journal *Neuroscience*, the group notes that despite the even odds in such games, [women](#) also tend to win more often when playing against an [intimate partner](#).

Prior research has suggested that in some scenarios, men in the modern era tend to go easy on their female intimate partners to make them happy when engaging in [social games](#). In this new effort, the team in China sought to test this theory by asking volunteers to play a social game then studied the action as it unfolded.

In the study, 52 adult women competed with others in a visual cue task that involved responding as quickly as possible to stimuli. At the outset, the group of women was split into two equally sized groups. One of the groups competed against male or female strangers. The second group competed against their [romantic partner](#).

As the women were engaged in their competitive events, they were monitored via EEG probes attached to their heads. The EEG readouts allowed the research team to monitor how engaged the brains of the women were as they competed, a measure of how hard they were trying to win.

The researchers found that the women competed more vigorously when competing against strangers than against their intimate partner. They also found that they won more often than would be due to chance alone when playing against their intimate partner, a sign that their partner was not playing as hard as they could or actively making sure not to win.

The researchers suggest the behavior of the men in the study might be an example of what they describe as "mate-retention behavior." This

strategy suggests a man is more likely to hold on to his partner if he works to keep her happy—in this case, by letting her win at social games.

More information: Shuyu Jia et al, Intimate Relationships Weaken Female Competition: Evidence from Phase-amplitude Coupling and Event-Related Potentials, *Neuroscience* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.neuroscience.2023.10.013](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroscience.2023.10.013)

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