

# The Effects of College Student Employment Expectations on Eye Size Preference and Ideal Mate Ratings

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## Introduction

- What a person finds attractive seems to be a function, at least in part, of how threatened they feel. See Nelson, Pettijohn, and Galak (in press) for a review.
- Past research has shown that facial features, such as eye size, are associated with specialized sets of attributes (see Zebrowitz, 1997). Large eye size is a component of a babyface, which is associated with the attributes of warmth, caring, honesty, naïveté, kindness, agreeableness, sociability, trustworthiness, and physical weakness. Small eye size is a component of a mature face, which is associated with the attributes of strength, dominance, competency, expertise, maturity, independence, status, and shrewdness.
- Other research has investigated body feature preferences across changing environmental conditions. Nelson and Morrison (2005) manipulated individual resource scarcity and measured ideal partner body weight preferences. Men who felt hungry or financially threatened expressed a relatively greater preference for heavier females compared to full or financially secure men.

## The Environmental Security Hypothesis

- Pettijohn & Tesser's (1999) *Environmental Security Hypothesis* is a context-dependent theory of attraction and preferences drawing on evolutionary theory and ecology. The theory suggests that when social and economic conditions are threatening, individuals will prefer others with more mature characteristics compared to non-threatening conditions because maturity is associated with the ability to handle threatening situations.
- Past archival research on American actress facial features (Pettijohn & Tesser, 1999), *Playboy* Playmate facial and body features (Pettijohn & Jungeberg, 2004), as well as experimental studies (Pettijohn & Tesser, 2005) have supported this theory.

## Predictions

- In accordance with the *Environmental Security Hypothesis*, we hypothesized that participants who believed there was an uncertain job outlook for college graduates would rate models with small eyes as more attractive and rate mature personality characteristics in ideal mates more favorably, compared to participants with a certain job outlook.

## Method

- *Participants*
  - 160 college students, 116 women and 44 men
- *Materials & Procedure*
  - Participants read an article depicting the job outlook for graduating college students as either certain or uncertain. After reading the essay, participants were asked to summarize the essay and relate it to their own experiences.
  - After writing the essay, participants completed a state-anxiety measure (Spielberger, 1983) as a manipulation check.
  - Participants viewed and rated the attractiveness of a counter-balanced series of pictures of four college-age males and four college-age females with large and small manipulated eye size.
  - Participants also rated ideal mate personality characteristics, including a set of five mature-faced traits (confident, mature, independent, emotionally strong, successful) and a set of five babyfaced traits (kind, agreeable, warm, honest, naive).

## Job Outlook Articles

### Uncertain Job Outlook Article

As a college student, it is important to your future that you read the following article from the Department of Education.

A National Review Board of College Academics has speculated that the current United States economy will provide problems for future college graduates. Large corporations and small businesses alike have begun massive cutbacks to increase their efficiency and profit margin. Besides cutting the number of positions available, employers are also cutting pay, increasing the number of hours per week required, and eliminating many of the benefit packages offered in the past. This outlook strategy means that college graduates are having an extremely difficult time obtaining and keeping jobs. Economists predict that only 60% of college graduates in the next 5 years will be able to locate jobs within 1 year of graduation. Even graduates that are lucky enough to secure jobs are not likely to feel satisfied with the amount of work they put in for the pay and benefits they receive. Part of this problem is the large increase of students attending post-secondary institutions. The CEO of a large corporation had this to say about the future outlook on employment for college graduates, "In effect, there are more qualified applicants competing for less positions than were previously available. A college degree no longer guarantees a job after graduation."

### Certain Job Outlook Article

As a college student, it is important to your future that you read the following article from the Department of Education.

A National Review Board of College Academics has speculated that the current United States economy will provide excellent opportunities for future college graduates. Large corporations and small businesses alike have begun massive expansions to meet the increase in demand brought about by the growth of the current economy. Besides increasing the number of positions available, employers are also increasing pay, decreasing the number of hours per week required, and adding benefits to the benefit packages offered in the past. This growth strategy means that college graduates are having a relatively easy time obtaining and keeping jobs. Economists predict that 80% of college graduates in the next 5 years will be able to locate jobs within 1 year of graduation. These graduates that secure jobs are very satisfied with the amount of work they put in for the pay and benefits they receive. The CEO of a large corporation had this to say about the future outlook on employment for college graduates, "Recent growth and expansion nearly guarantees all college graduates of excellent employment opportunities. We anticipate more future job openings than there are qualified applicants to fill these positions."

## Results: Eye Size Preference

- The manipulation check showed that participants reported greater state-anxiety in response to the uncertain job outlook condition compared to the certain job outlook condition,  $t(158) = 3.62, p < .001$ .
- A 2 (Job Outlook Condition: Certain or Uncertain) x 2 (Participant Sex: Male or Female) x 2 (Model Eye Size: Large and Small) x 2 (Model Sex: Male and Female) repeated measures ANOVA was conducted on the model attractiveness ratings.
  - The Job Outlook Condition x Model Eye Size interaction was significant,  $F(1, 158) = 3.82, p = .05$ . Participants rated models with large eyes as more attractive in the certain job outlook condition and models with small eyes as more attractive in the uncertain condition. See Figure 1.
  - The female models were rated as more attractive than the male models overall ( $p < .001$ ).
  - The Target Sex x Participant Sex interaction was significant ( $p < .001$ ). Males rated the female models as more attractive and females rated the male models as more attractive.
  - The interaction between Model Eye Size and Model Sex was also significant ( $p = .02$ ). Female models with big eyes and males with small eyes were rated as more attractive.
  - No other main or interaction effects were statistically significant.

## Results: Ideal Mate Personality Ratings

- A 2 (Job Outlook Condition: Certain or Uncertain) x 2 (Participant Sex: Male or Female) x 2 (Personality Trait Set: Mature-faced and Babyfaced) repeated measures ANOVA was conducted on the trait ratings.
  - The Job Outlook Condition x Personality Trait Set interaction was not statistically significant, but individual comparisons in the certain job outlook condition supported our predictions. See Figure 2.
  - Overall, the mature-faced personality trait set was rated as more desirable than the babyfaced trait set ( $p < .001$ ).
  - There was a significant Participant Sex x Personality Trait Set interaction ( $p = .035$ ). Females rated the mature-faced trait set as more desirable and males rated the mature-faced trait set as slightly more desirable than the babyfaced trait set.
  - The 3-way interaction was not statistically significant.
  - Female participants rated all traits higher than male participants ( $p = .03$ ).
  - Participants in the certain job outlook condition rated traits higher than participants in the uncertain job outlook condition ( $p < .01$ ).

Figure 1. Mean Model Attractiveness Ratings by Job Outlook Condition and Model Eye Size

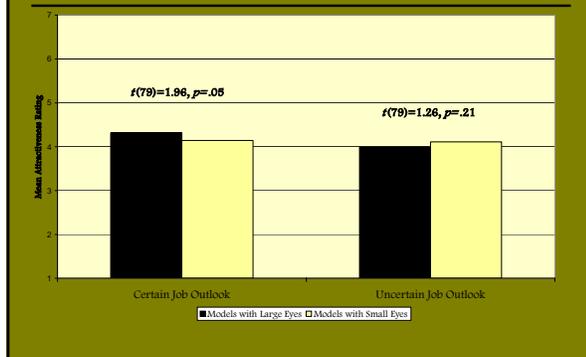
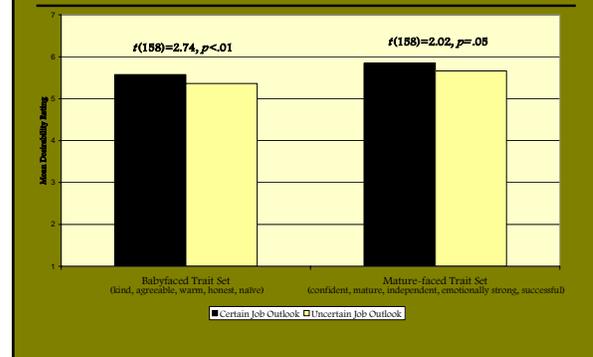


Figure 2. Mean Ideal Mate Desirability Ratings by Trait Set and Job Outlook Condition



## Discussion

- The eye preference results support the *Environmental Security Hypothesis* predictions, but the personality trait ratings results were mixed.
  - As predicted, there was a significant interaction between job outlook condition and model eye size. Participants rated the models with large eyes as significantly more attractive in the certain job outlook condition and participants rated the models with small eyes as slightly more attractive in the uncertain job outlook condition.
  - As predicted, participants rated the babyfaced trait set as more desirable in an ideal mate in the certain job outlook condition compared to the uncertain condition. Contrary to predicted, participants also rated the mature-faced trait set as more desirable in an ideal mate in the certain job outlook condition compared to the uncertain condition. Perhaps the desirability of mate characteristics is more salient when times are good or there is an emotional positivity bias associated with economic certainty.

## Discussion continued

- Appearance related assessments for general attractiveness may be more sensitive to environmental security influences than personality ratings for ideal mates. The personality ratings were also made after the attractiveness assessments, further from the time of the original job outlook certainty manipulation, which may explain the mixed results.
- Although sex differences were not part of the original predictions, they followed basic evolutionary mate preference patterns. However, overall results also show how these evolutionary findings can be influenced by environmental threat.
- Future studies may investigate how other dimensions of attractiveness, such as body shape preferences or hair color preferences, may be influenced by environmental security.
- These findings extend the *Environmental Security Hypothesis* and contribute new insight into perceptions of beauty and how environmental circumstances can influence partner preferences.