

Leveling the Playing Field: Acquaintance Length Predicts Reduced Assortative Mating on  
Attractiveness

Lucy L. Hunt and Paul W. Eastwick

University of Texas at Austin

Eli J. Finkel

Northwestern University

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### **Abstract**

Clear empirical demonstrations of the theoretical principles underlying assortative mating remain elusive. This article examines a moderator of assortative mating—how well couple members knew each other prior to dating—that follows from recent findings related to market-based (i.e., competition) theories. Specifically, competition is pervasive to the extent that people achieve consensus about who possesses desirable qualities (e.g., attractiveness) and who does not. As consensus is stronger earlier rather than later in the acquaintance process, assortative mating on attractiveness should be stronger among couples who formed a relationship after a short rather than long period of acquaintance. A study of 167 couples included measures of how long partners had known each other pre-dating, whether they were friends pre-dating, and coder-ratings of attractiveness. As predicted, couples revealed stronger evidence of assortative mating to the extent that they knew each other for a short time and were not friends before relationship formation.

*Keywords:* assortative mating, competitive market forces, similarity, attraction, attractiveness

## Leveling the Playing Field: Acquaintance Length Predicts Reduced Assortative Mating on Attractiveness

Nearly every social scientific discipline studies human mating. Economists, anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists all examine overlapping portions of the mating process, each field contributing its own theoretical perspectives and methodologies. In this milieu, one mating-relevant phenomenon has received robust attention from all social scientific perspectives for over a century: assortative mating.

Assortative mating refers to the tendency for individuals to be paired with mates who are similar to them on various physical, behavioral, and psychological characteristics (Lutz, 1905; Lykken & Tellegen, 1993). In other words, the scores provided by the two individuals in a romantic pair tend to be positively correlated, typically to a greater extent than random pairs created from the same samples. This observation has been used to buttress claims about how people sort demographically, initiate relationships, and maintain relationships across disciplines as diverse as economics (Becker, 1991), sociology (Kalmijn, 1998), evolutionary psychology (Buss, 1985), behavior genetics (Reynolds, Baker, & Pederson, 2000), family studies (Houts, Robins, & Huston, 1996), and social psychology (Feingold, 1988).

A variety of explanatory frameworks can address why assortative mating emerges. One particularly influential framework draws from competition or “market-based” perspectives: Individuals compete to obtain desirable mates, and an individual’s success in this mating market is constrained by his/her own desirability (Kalick & Hamilton, 1986). This framework is typically used to explain sorting on physical attractiveness ( $r = .30-.40$  in meta-analyses; Feingold, 1988), a quality that is, to both men and women, one of the most highly desirable characteristics in a romantic partner (Eastwick, Luchies, Finkel, & Hunt, 2014). Other plausible

frameworks include similarity-attraction (i.e., matching) perspectives, which note that individuals prefer mates who are similar rather than dissimilar (Berscheid, Dion, Walster, & Walster, 1971; Sprecher & Hatfield, 2009), and propinquity perspectives, which note that individuals are likely to encounter potential mates who already resemble them (“mating requires meeting”; Kalmijn & Flap, 2001).

Despite considerable research on this topic, empirical work that links one or more of these frameworks to the mechanism underlying assortative mating is lacking. Scholars frequently compare assortative mating correlations across different traits (e.g., Figueredo, Sefcek, & Jones, 2006; Hur, 2003; Watson et al., 2004). Yet cross-variable comparisons typically do not allow for precise tests of one of the underlying theories, and complicating matters is the fact that the assortative mating effect size (e.g.,  $r = .30$ ) is often similar across variables linked to competition frameworks (e.g., attractiveness  $r = .31$ ; Hitsch, Hortaçsu, & Ariely, 2010), similarity-attraction frameworks (e.g., openness  $r = .29$ ; Escorial & Martin-Buro, 2012), and propinquity frameworks (e.g., education  $r = .30$ ; Godoy et al., 2008). A more precise demonstration of mechanism would reveal that assortative mating correlations shift *for a single trait* according to factors that derive from one of the theoretical perspectives. This manuscript examines how assortative mating on an unambiguously desirable characteristic (i.e., physical attractiveness) shifts depending on a variable that is, as explained in the next section, theoretically linked to the presence of competitive market forces: the length of time that couple members knew each other before they began dating.

### **Consensus and Uniqueness Shift with Length of Acquaintance**

Investigations into interpersonal perceptual processes (Kenny, 1994; Kenny & La Voie, 1984) have shown that all judgments, including ratings of attractiveness and romantic

desirability, include some degree of consensus (i.e., agreement about a target across raters) and uniqueness (i.e., high or low ratings of a target by a given rater). The relative balance of consensus vs. uniqueness may affect assortative mating correlations. Consider assortative mating on desirability in the Pairing Game, a class exercise used to illustrate the matching phenomenon (Ellis & Kelley, 1999). Students playing this game hold random numbers (e.g., playing cards) to indicate their hypothetical desirability, and they attempt to pair up with the most desirable target possible. Because each person's value is entirely determined by his/her number, this game contains perfect consensus and no uniqueness—all participants' ratings are identical for each target. This setup amplifies competitive market forces and results in highly matched pairs. Eastwick and Buck (2014) modified the game to include an equal amount of consensus and uniqueness in students' assigned numbers; now, students could succeed by acquiring a consensually desirable target (i.e., a high card value), a uniquely desirable target (i.e., a match to his/her randomly assigned playing-card suit-preference), or some combination thereof. Assortative mating was much lower in the modified game than the original version of the game. In other words, to the extent that contexts feature less consensus and more uniqueness, competitive market forces diminish, and pairs that are mismatched on consensual desirability are more likely to emerge.

What environments contain low levels of consensus and high levels of uniqueness in real life? In an investigation of romantic evaluations of acquaintances, classmates, and close opposite-sex others, Eastwick and Hunt (2014) found that as length of acquaintanceship increased, individuals exhibited less consensus and more uniqueness in their judgments of the extent to which known others possessed various romantically desirable qualities. For example, consensus on ratings of physical attractiveness was larger than uniqueness by 2 percentage points

when raters had known one another for only two weeks, but uniqueness was larger than consensus by 10 percentage points after 14 weeks and 37 percentage points among well acquainted others. Essentially, longer periods of acquaintance afford more opportunities for opposite-sex raters to encounter one another across different contexts (e.g., Daria interacts with Trent at home and at school, whereas Brittany interacts with Trent only at school), and more opportunities to disagree about whether a target's behaviors reflect romantically desirable or undesirable qualities (e.g., Daria is impressed by Trent's musical performance onstage, but Brittany finds his playing pretentious and strange; Eastwick & Hunt, 2014). Thus, as individuals become acquainted over time, romantic impressions become increasingly unique and less consensual.

Taken together, these studies suggest that length of acquaintanceship should be tied to patterns of assortative mating on physical attractiveness. As acquaintanceship length increases, consensus about others' desirable qualities declines (Eastwick & Hunt, 2014). In contexts featuring reduced consensus, competitive forces on the mating market diminish, resulting in more mismatched pairs (i.e., reduced assortative mating; Eastwick & Buck, 2014). Therefore, the length of time that couple members knew each other *prior to the actual formation of their relationship*—even if this event lay many years in the distant past—should predict lower assortative mating.

### **Method**

As part of a broader study, dating and married couples reported how long they had known each other and how long they had been romantically involved. Independent judges rated the attractiveness of each member of the couple. Our central hypothesis was that the length of time couple members knew each other before becoming romantically involved would moderate the

association between the man's attractiveness and the woman's attractiveness. Specifically, this association should be stronger among couples who formed a relationship after a shorter rather than a longer amount of time after meeting each other. Also, the dataset included a conceptually related measure: whether or not the couple members were platonic friends before dating. Given that an initial period of platonic friendship should give couple members a chance to form impressions of each other outside of the romantic competition process, we also hypothesized that assortative mating would be stronger for couples who were not friends before dating than for couples who were friends before dating.

### **Participants**

Participants in this study consisted of  $N = 167$  couples (334 individual participants) who were drawn from a larger sample of 195 couples taking part in a longitudinal study of romantic relationships (DeWall et al., 2011; Finkel, Slotter, Luchies, Walton, & Gross, 2013; Slotter, Emery, & Luchies, 2014). (Video data from seven couples were unusable due to technical/clerical problems, and the rationale for exclusion of the additional 21 couples is presented in section "Moderator: Time Known Pre-dating" below.) These 167 couples were a mix of dating ( $N = 67$  couples) and married ( $N = 100$  couples) couples; the average relationship length for all couples was 104 months ( $SD = 132$  months, range = 3 to 645 months), and the average marriage length for the married couples was 125 months ( $SD = 147$  months, range = 1 to 613 months). The 334 participants were 31.7 years old on average ( $SD = 13.9$  years), and the race/ethnicity composition was 2.7% African-American/Black, 13.6% Asian-American/Asian, 78.9% Caucasian, 3.6% Hispanic/Latina, 0.6% Multiracial, and 0.6% missing/did not specify. Recruitment details and stopping rule information (i.e., decisions regarding how many participants to run) are included in Supplementary Materials.

### **Procedure**

Participants first completed a ~1-hr online intake questionnaire followed by a ~2.5-hr laboratory session. Part of the laboratory session consisted of a discussion in which the participants sat at a table and discussed how they had changed since beginning their relationship. These discussions were videotaped such that the head and torso of both couple members were clearly visible. Participants also completed other tasks that are not relevant to the present hypotheses.

## **Materials**

**Physical attractiveness coding.** Physical attractiveness was coded in two ways. First, seven trained undergraduate coders watched each of the self-change videos in its entirety. These coders completed several items about the couples in the videos, including a measure of the physical attractiveness of each partner on a scale from -3 (*very unattractive*) to 3 (*very attractive*). The coders were reliable,  $\alpha = .88$  for ratings of the men and  $\alpha = .92$  for ratings of the women. The assortative mating correlation (i.e., the correlation between the man's and woman's attractiveness ratings) using this measure was high,  $r = .55$ ,  $p < .001$ . Below, we refer to this measure as the *joint assessment* of physical attractiveness.

We surmised that assortative mating could have been particularly strong using this measure because the coders might inadvertently use one partner's attractiveness score (positively) when evaluating the other partner's attractiveness score. Therefore, we recoded physical attractiveness by having a new team of coders rate the attractiveness of the couple members one at a time. These raters watched clips consisting of only the first 5 seconds of each of the self-change videos (with no sound), and half of the screen was covered so that they could only see one member of the couple. On the first pass through the videos, they coded the man or woman sitting on the right side of the screen, and on the second pass through the videos, they



coded the man or woman sitting on the left side of the screen. Between four and nine trained undergraduate coders rated each video, depending on the size of the coding team during the semester that we assigned the coding task. The coders rated the extent to which each participant was *physically attractive* and *sexy* on 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*) scales; these two items were highly correlated ( $r = .93$  for men;  $r = .92$  for women), and so we averaged them to form the *separate assessment* measure of physical attractiveness. Again, the coders were reliable,  $\alpha = .90$  for ratings of the men and  $\alpha = .90$  for ratings of the women. As anticipated, the assortative mating correlation using this physical attractiveness measure, although still robust, was lower,  $r = .38$ ,  $p < .001$ , and closer to the meta-analytic average of  $r = .39$  (Feingold, 1988). We present the results for both measures of physical attractiveness in the Results section below, although hypothesis tests using an average of the two measures yielded identical conclusions. (The two measures correlated at  $r = .81$ ).

**Moderator: Time Known Pre-dating.** Romantic relationships scholars frequently assess relationship length, but they rarely assess the additional information required to calculate the amount of time that couple members knew each other before they began dating. Fortunately, on the intake questionnaire of the present dataset, participants completed two items that we were able to use to compute this variable. One item was “How many months have you known your romantic partner (spouse)?” and the other item was “How many months have you been romantically involved with your partner (spouse)?” The difference between these two items (time known minus time involved) is the time that the couple members knew each other before they began dating (*time known pre-dating*). These items were reported by both the man and the woman in each couple; their answers correlated highly ( $r = .98$  for both items), and we took an

average of the man's and woman's time known pre-dating values for use in all analyses below. One of the 188 couples did not report values for these items and is excluded from analyses.

Participants responded to these items in months, and so the possible upper limit of time known pre-dating values was quite high. As a consequence, some couples exhibited extreme scores on this variable (e.g., 7 *SD* above the mean) and would therefore have possessed considerable leverage in any regression analysis. In order to address this variability in an a priori, empirically sound manner, we calculated Tukey's outer fences for the time known pre-dating variable and considered values outside of this range ( $N = 20$  couples) to be missing (Eastwick et al., 2006; Myers & Well, 1995; Tukey, 1977). According to this procedure, scores of 19 months or greater were considered extreme values. For the 167 couples used in the analyses below, time known pre-dating had a mean of 3.8 months, a median of 2 months, a *SD* of 4.3 months, and a range of 0-17.5 months.

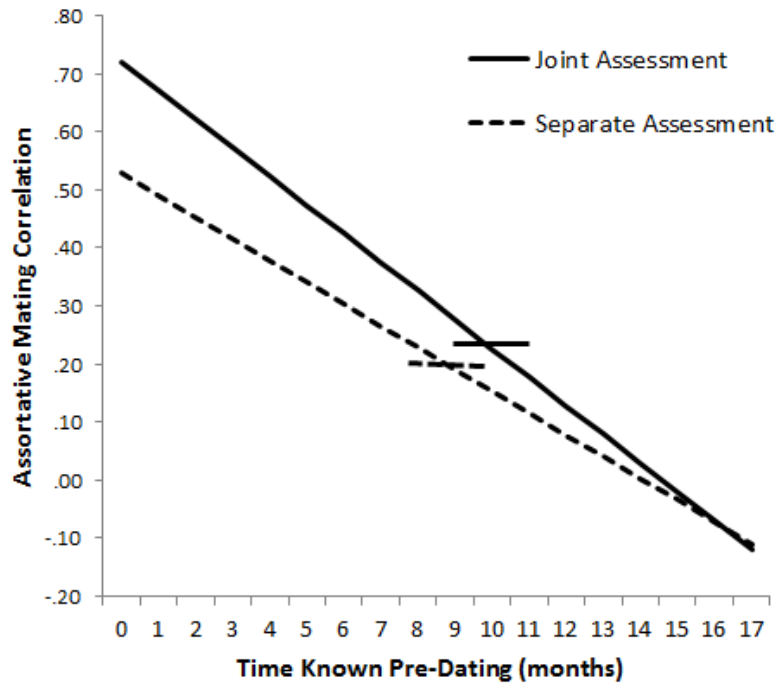
Participants also completed an item on the intake questionnaire that could be conceptualized as a (less precise) estimate of how well two individuals were acquainted before dating: "Were you and your partner platonic friends before becoming romantically involved?" (coded 0 = no, 1 = yes). We also examined this *friends first* variable as an alternative moderator of the assortative mating association in the analyses reported below. As with the time known pre-dating variable, we took the average of the man's and woman's report within each couple: 41% of couples indicated that they were not friends first, 40% indicated that they were friends first, 19% disagreed on whether they were friends first (and hence received a score of .5 on this variable), and 1% did not complete this item. The time known pre-dating and friends first measures correlated at  $r = .40, p < .001$ ; hypothesis tests using a composite measure of these two

variables (i.e., an average of the standardized version of time known pre-dating and friends first for each couple) revealed identical conclusions.

### Results

To examine whether the length of time that couple members knew each other before they began dating would moderate the size of the assortative mating correlation, we first examined whether time known pre-dating interacted with the man's attractiveness to predict the woman's attractiveness. This interaction was significant for both the joint assessment,  $\beta = -.21$ ,  $t(163) = -3.15$ ,  $p = .002$ , and separate assessment,  $\beta = -.16$ ,  $t(163) = -2.53$ ,  $p = .012$ , of physical attractiveness.<sup>1</sup> The negative sign of the interaction indicates that couple members were less likely to be matched for attractiveness the longer they had known each other before they started dating. Predicted values derived from these two regressions are plotted in Figure 1. For both measures of attractiveness, predicted values for the assortative mating correlation were quite strong for couple members who began dating within a month of meeting each other ( $r = .72$  and  $r = .53$  for the joint and separate assessment measures, respectively, at time known pre-dating = 0). However, as time known pre-dating increased, the size of the assortative mating correlation for physical attractiveness decreased. The Johnson-Neyman significance region (provided by the Hayes, 2013, PROCESS macro for SPSS) ended at 9.9 months and 8.8 months for the joint and separate assessment measures, respectively. In other words, if couple members knew each other for ~9 months or more before they started dating (while still remaining in the typical range of pre-dating acquaintanceship duration), assortative mating on physical attractiveness was modest in magnitude and not significantly different from zero.

Figure 1

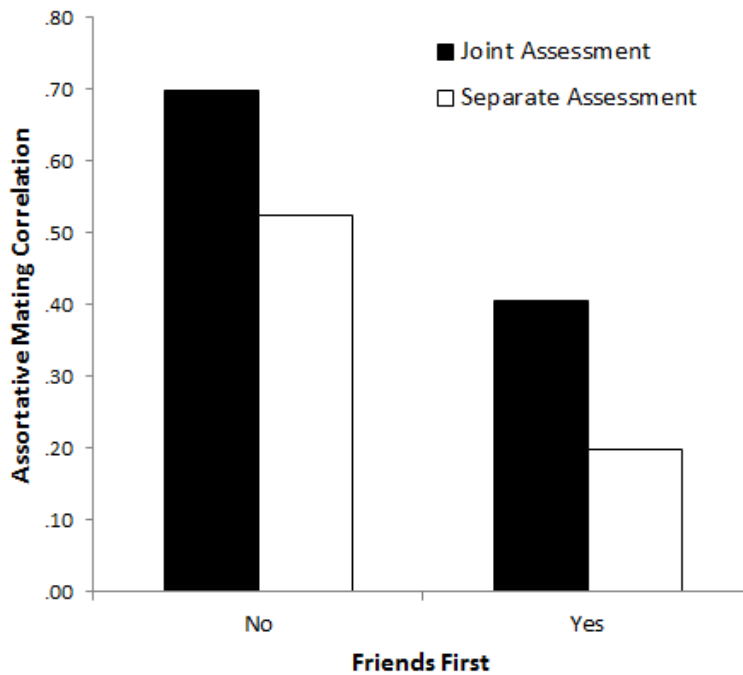


*Figure 1 Caption:* Predicted values for the assortative mating correlation given the length of time that couple members had known each other before they started dating. Regression lines are presented separately for the joint and separate assessments of physical attractiveness. Predicted values are depicted across the entire range of the time known pre-dating variable analyzed in the current study. The horizontal dashes indicate the boundary for the Johnson-Neyman region of significance; y axis values beneath these dashes are not significantly different from zero.

We also examined whether the friends first variable moderated the size of the assortative mating correlation using a similar regression analysis. Once again, the interaction was significant for both the joint assessment,  $\beta = -.13$ ,  $t(162) = -2.04$ ,  $p = .043$ , and separate assessment,  $\beta = -.15$ ,  $t(162) = -2.03$ ,  $p = .044$ , of physical attractiveness. In other words, couple members were less likely to be matched for attractiveness if they were friends before they started dating. Predicted values derived from these two regressions are presented in Figure 2. For couples who were not friends before they started dating, assortative mating correlations were predicted to be  $r = .70$  and  $r = .52$  for the joint and separate assessments of attractiveness, respectively. However,

for participants who were friends first, these correlations were predicted to be  $r = .40$  and  $r = .20$ , respectively. (All four correlations were at least marginally significantly different from zero according to the Johnson-Neyman significance region.)

Figure 2



*Figure 2 Caption:* Predicted values for the assortative mating correlation for couples who were and were not friends before they started dating. Values are presented separately for the joint and separate assessments of physical attractiveness.

For the friends first variable, it is straightforward to calculate the actual assortative mating correlations (i.e., not the predicted correlations) by correlating the men's and women's attractiveness scores at the three different values of the friends first variable (i.e., no, disagreed, and yes). For the joint assessment of attractiveness, couples who were not friends first exhibited assortative mating correlations of  $r = .67$  ( $N = 68$ ,  $p < .001$ ), couples who disagreed about whether they were friends first exhibited a correlation of  $r = .57$  ( $N = 31$ ,  $p = .001$ ), and couples

who were friends first exhibited a correlation of  $r = .43$  ( $N = 67$ ,  $p < .001$ ). For the separate assessment of attractiveness, couples who were not friends first exhibited assortative mating correlations of  $r = .46$  ( $N = 68$ ,  $p < .001$ ), couples who disagreed about whether they were friends first exhibited a correlation of  $r = .52$  ( $N = 31$ ,  $p = .002$ ), and couples who were friends first exhibited a correlation of  $r = .18$  ( $N = 67$ ,  $p = .138$ ). This pattern of correlations is similar to the pattern of predicted values generated by the regression equations above.

Also, we examined whether relationship status (i.e., dating vs. married) or relationship length moderated the four significant interactions reported above (i.e., 8 total analyses). Only one of the eight moderational analyses was significant or marginal: For the joint assessment of attractiveness, dating vs. married status significantly moderated the friends first analysis,  $\beta = -.16$ ,  $t(158) = -2.45$ ,  $p = .015$ . The friends first variable was a significant moderator of the assortative mating correlation for married couples,  $\beta = -.27$ ,  $t(95) = -3.00$ ,  $p = .003$ , but not for dating couples,  $\beta = .03$ ,  $t(63) = 0.34$ ,  $p = .737$ . The moderational effect was not predicted a priori and should be interpreted with caution.

Finally, the association between similarity in attractiveness and relationship quality has been a subject of some debate in the assortative mating literature, with some studies finding evidence that there is a positive association between similarity in attractiveness and relationship outcomes (e.g., White, 1980), and other studies failing to find such an association (e.g., Murstein & Christy, 1976). The current sample revealed no association between couple matching on attractiveness (i.e., the absolute value of the difference between the partners' attractiveness scores) and relationship satisfaction (assessed using the 5-item Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998, measure) for either men or women,  $r$ s ranged from  $-.03$  to  $-.07$ . That is, matched couples were no

more likely to be satisfied with their relationships than mismatched couples. None of these associations were moderated by relationship status or relationship length.

### **Discussion**

The current investigation sheds light on how length of acquaintanceship prior to romantic relationship initiation predicts the tendency for individuals to form relationships with partners similar in attractiveness. Couples who formed their relationship soon after meeting were more likely to match on physical attractiveness than those who formed their relationship well after meeting each other. Moreover, assortative mating on attractiveness was stronger among couples who were not friends prior to dating than those who were friends prior to dating. Taken together, these findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating that relatively short acquaintance lengths tend to feature romantic impressions that rely heavily on consensual desirability, whereas longer acquaintance lengths tend to feature romantic impressions that rely heavily on unique, idiosyncratic desirability (Eastwick & Hunt, 2014). The observed assortative mating patterns in this study may be due to the fact that impression formation contexts featuring less consensus and more uniqueness reduce competition and allow individuals to acquire uniquely desirable partners (Eastwick & Buck, 2014).

Although the notion that relationship timing affects relationship dynamics is not new, previous investigations have failed to pinpoint precisely how time influences mating (Eastwick, 2013). For example, length of time dating (rather than length of time *pre*-dating) has been examined as a moderator of assortative mating on attractiveness in previous investigations (e.g., White, 1980), yet subsequent meta-analyses (e.g., Feingold, 1988) failed to support this hypothesis. Drawing from recent findings in the attraction and interpersonal perception domains, this study is the first to show that length of time knowing an individual before dating reliably moderates assortative mating trends observed many years later. Thus, the current study

highlights the importance of integrating studies on relationship maintenance with studies on relationship initiation, as the process of romantic initiation can have profound effects on future relationship dynamics.

Market forces theories (e.g., Kalick & Hamilton, 1986) combined with contemporary research on consensus in person perception (Eastwick & Hunt, 2014) generated the current predictions. Yet the findings do not contradict other theoretical frameworks relevant to assortative mating. In fact, a meta-analysis by Montoya, Horton, and Kirchner (2008) demonstrated that, across both field and laboratory studies, the similarity-attraction effect was stronger in contexts involving little or no interaction than contexts involving many interactions or existing relationships. Thus, the current pattern of results could in principle reflect a stronger preference for similar partners among shorter-term acquaintances. However, the market forces framework is likely to remain a more compelling explanation for the current set of findings than the similarity-attraction framework given that the similarity-attraction effect generally tends to be weak to nonexistent for physical attractiveness (Shaw Taylor, Fiore, Mendelsohn, & Cheshire, 2011; Tidwell, Eastwick, & Finkel, 2013).

The current study unearths several exciting directions for future research. The theoretical rationale for examining a single, highly desirable trait (i.e., physical attractiveness) in this investigation stemmed from recent findings showing that contextual features linked to the presence vs. absence of strong competitive forces (e.g., degree of consensus) should predict assortative mating patterns. Future research is required to determine whether these assortative mating shifts would apply to other characteristics, especially those that are less consensually desirable at initial acquaintance (e.g., religiosity). Furthermore, such shifts should be examined across more diverse samples (e.g., gay/lesbian couples) and across different relationship contexts



in order to pinpoint precisely when shifts in assortative mating trends reliably occur. For example, closed field contexts (e.g., workplaces, classrooms) may permit longer acquaintanceships and generate “friends-first” relationships, whereas open field contexts (e.g., bars, large social gatherings) may lend themselves to romantic pairings after shorter acquaintanceships (Murstein, 1970). That is, independently of acquaintance length, closed fields (vs. open fields) might also encourage individuals to form idiosyncratic impressions of others’ desirable qualities, thus reducing assortative mating. An exploration of assortment patterns meta-analytically and longitudinally—from attraction to established relationships and across different kinds of settings—would undoubtedly enhance understanding of relationship initiation and maintenance.

The current study is one of the first investigations to link an explanatory framework (i.e., competitive market forces) to a mechanism underlying assortative mating on physical attractiveness (i.e., time known before dating). This moderator reinforces the point that relationship initiation and maintenance must be understood as part of the same continuous process in humans; to consider these two relationship stages separately may preclude a complete understanding of human mating. The present findings suggest that in contexts where people generally agree about who is desirable and who is not, competition in the mating market will be strong, and sorting according to this agreed-upon desirability will be prominent. Yet in contexts that allow people to develop divergent perceptions about each other’s positive and negative idiosyncrasies, the traditional trappings of market forces fall away, permitting individuals to seek mates on a more level playing field.

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#### Footnote

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<sup>1</sup> Hypothesis tests revealed similar but weaker conclusions if we crop the 20 excluded couples to have the Tukey outer fence value of 19 months (i.e., as if we had administered a 20-point scale ranging from 0 to 19+). In this case, the interaction for the joint assessment remained marginally significant,  $\beta = -.11$ ,  $t(183) = -1.74$ ,  $p = .084$ , but the interaction for the separate assessment fell below significance,  $\beta = -.10$ ,  $t(183) = -1.43$ ,  $p = .153$ .

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Questions or comments concerning this paper should be directed to Lucy Hunt, University of Texas at Austin, 108 E Dean Keeton St, Stop A2702, Austin, TX 78712. Please direct any emails to [lucyhunt@utexas.edu](mailto:lucyhunt@utexas.edu).