

# Women's mate retention behaviors, personality traits, and fellatio



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## ABSTRACT

Women perform oral sex on their male partner (i.e., fellatio) as part of a Benefit-Provisioning mate retention strategy, and women's personality predicts their interest in, and time spent, performing fellatio. We explored whether women's mate retention behavior mediates the relationship between their personality traits and their performance of fellatio in a long-term romantic relationship. Women ( $n = 401$ ) reported their personality traits, the frequency with which they performed mate retention behaviors during the past month, and their interest in and the time they spent performing fellatio on their partner during their most recent sexual encounter. The results indicate that women higher in Conscientiousness spend more time performing fellatio on their partner, and this relationship is mediated by their Benefit-Provisioning mate retention. Women higher in Agreeableness report greater interest in performing fellatio on their partner, and less Cost-Inflicting mate retention, but mate retention behaviors do not mediate the relationship between their Agreeableness and their interest in performing fellatio. The current research is the first to investigate the relationship between women's personality traits and oral sex behaviors, and contributes to research documenting that mate retention strategies are associated with sexual behavior.

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## 1. Introduction

Oral sex is a prominent feature of human sexuality. Oral sex is practiced cross-culturally (e.g., Guadamuz et al., 2010; Iwawaki & Wilson, 1983; Kaestle & Halpern, 2007; Santtila et al., 2007), often depicted in pornography (Rimm, 1994), and portrayed in artwork dating back thousands of years (Angulo & García, 2005). Despite the ubiquity of oral sex, only one study has investigated the links between personality and oral sex. Pham et al. (2014) documented that men's interest in, and time spent, performing oral sex on their female partner (i.e., cunnilingus) is positively related to men's Agreeableness and Conscientiousness. No research has investigated the links between women's personality and women's oral sex behaviors. The current study aims to replicate and extend Pham et al. (2014) to a female sample. Women more often perform oral sex on their male partner (i.e., fellatio) in a long-term relationship than in a casual, sexual encounter (e.g., Armstrong, England, & Fogarty, 2009; Fielder & Carey, 2010), so the current research focuses on long-term relationships.

### 1.1. Women's personality and partner's relationship satisfaction

The Five-Factor Model describes five dimensions of personality: Surgency (Extraversion), Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability (Neuroticism), and Openness to Experience (Goldberg, 1982; Norman, 1963). Women's Agreeableness is positively associated with their partner's sexual satisfaction, marital quality (Donnellan, Conger, & Bryant, 2004), and relationship satisfaction (Malouff, Thorsteinsson, Schutte, Bhullar, & Rooke, 2010). Women higher in Agreeableness maintain more harmonious relationships (e.g., Buss, 1991; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Women's Emotional Stability is positively associated with their partner's relationship satisfaction (e.g., Karney & Bradbury, 1997), even after controlling for his own standing on this trait (Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997; Bouchard, Lussier, & Sabourin, 1999; Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2000).

### 1.2. Fellatio and partner's relationship satisfaction

Oral sex is a common sexual activity (e.g., Santtila et al., 2007) that is positively associated with sexual satisfaction (Brody & Costa, 2009) and relationship satisfaction (Ashdown, Hackathorn, & Clark, 2011). Men are equally likely to report receiving fellatio from their partner and performing cunnilingus on her at their most

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recent sexual encounter as women are to report performing fellatio and receiving cunnilingus (Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2012; cf. de Visser, Smith, Rissel, Richters, & Grulich, 2003). Most men and women report experiencing oral sex at least once in their life (de Visser et al., 2003) and a desire to experience oral sex (Santtila et al., 2007). Men desire oral sex more often than women, and men's (but not women's) relationship satisfaction is positively correlated with the frequency with which they experience oral sex (Santtila et al., 2007).

Fellatio may increase a partner's relationship satisfaction. Women report performing fellatio on their partner to improve the relationship and to provide him with sexual pleasure (Cornell & Halpern-Felsher, 2006), and men who receive fellatio more frequently report greater relationship satisfaction (Kaestle & Halpern, 2007). Women that more frequently perform mate retention behaviors of love and care are also more interested in, and spend more time, performing fellatio on their partner (Sela, Shackelford, Pham, & Euler, 2015), and they are more likely to report performing fellatio if they report that they love him "a lot" (Kaestle & Halpern, 2007). Because women's Agreeableness is positively related to their partner's relationship satisfaction, and because women perform fellatio to satisfy him, we hypothesize that women higher in Agreeableness will report greater interest in (Hypothesis 1), and spend more time (Hypothesis 2), performing fellatio on their partner.

### 1.3. Women's mate retention

Women perform mate retention to reduce the risk of their partner's infidelity (Buss, 1988; Buss & Shackelford, 1997). Buss (1988) identified 104 acts clustered into 19 mate retention "tactics." Buss organized these tactics into five "categories": Direct Guarding (includes behaviors such as vigilance about a partner's whereabouts), Intersexual Negative Inducements (includes behaviors that manipulate and derogate one's partner), Intrasexual Negative Inducements (includes behaviors intended to deter same-sex rivals from pursuing one's partner), Positive Inducements (includes behaviors that increase the appeal of the current relationship to one's partner), and Public Signals of Possession (includes behaviors that display to others that one's relationship is exclusive).

Miner, Starratt, and Shackelford (2009) grouped the five categories into two superordinate mate retention "domains": Cost-Inflicting (includes the categories Direct Guarding, Intersexual Negative Inducements, and Intrasexual Negative Inducements) and Benefit-Provisioning (includes the categories Positive Inducements and Public Signals of Possession). Cost-Inflicting behaviors reduce the risk of partner infidelity by lowering a partner's self-esteem, causing the partner to feel unworthy of the current relationship or any other potential relationship (Miner et al., 2009). Benefit-Provisioning behaviors reduce the risk of partner infidelity by increasing a partner's relationship satisfaction (Miner et al., 2009).

### 1.4. Women's personality, fellatio, and mate retention

Women higher in Agreeableness are more likely to provision their partner with benefits. Agreeableness is related to altruism (Buss, 1996; Saucier & Goldberg, 1996), and women incur costs when they provision their partner with benefits (Miner et al., 2009), including time, effort (e.g., "I made sure that I looked nice for my partner"), and money (e.g., "I bought my partner an expensive gift"; Buss, 1988). Agreeableness is also linked with cooperation (Nettle, 2006), whereas low Agreeableness – sometimes linked with aggression – is associated with social cost-inflicting tactics (Larsen & Buss, 2008). For example, those low on

Agreeableness are more abusive, jealous, and sexually withholding toward their partners (Buss, 1991). de Miguel and Buss (2011) documented a negative association between women's Agreeableness and their Cost-Inflicting mate retention.

Women may perform fellatio as part of a Benefit-Provisioning mate retention strategy. Women who more frequently provision their partner with benefits report greater interest in, and spend more time, performing fellatio on their partner (Sela et al., 2015). Because women higher in Agreeableness are more likely to provision their partner with benefits, and because fellatio is part of a Benefit-Provisioning mate retention strategy, we hypothesize that women's Benefit-Provisioning mate retention will mediate the relationship between their Agreeableness and their interest in (Hypothesis 3), and time spent (Hypothesis 4), performing fellatio on their partner. Because women's Neuroticism correlates negatively with their partner's relationship satisfaction (e.g., Malouff et al., 2010), we hypothesize that women's Emotional Stability will positively correlate with their Benefit-Provisioning mate retention (Hypothesis 5) and with their interest in (Hypothesis 6), and time spent (Hypothesis 7), performing fellatio on their partner. Because no previous research has investigated the links between women's personality characteristics and fellatio, we do not offer hypotheses about the relationships of other personality dimensions with women's interest in, and time spent, performing fellatio. For reportorial completeness, we statistically explored the relationships between women's scores on the five personality dimensions, mate retention, and fellatio.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedures

Female university students and community members were recruited by posted flyers on and around campus, word of mouth, and in-class announcements. Most participants were compensated with nominal extra credit in an undergraduate course in the social and behavioral sciences. To qualify for participation, women had to be at least 18 years old and in a committed, sexual, heterosexual relationship. Participants arrived at a scheduled time and location to receive printed materials (informed consent and survey), and were asked to complete these in privacy and at a time and location convenient for them. Most participants returned their completed materials within 48 h. To maintain anonymity, participants placed the signed consent form in an envelope which they then sealed, and the completed survey assessing their mate retention, personality traits, and oral sex behavior in a separate envelope, which they then sealed. Each envelope was placed in one of two boxes, both of which contained many other envelopes.

Four hundred eighteen women in a committed, sexual, heterosexual relationship participated in this research. We excluded data for 17 participants because their scores were missing or more than 3 standard deviations from the mean for one or more of the variables. The mean age of the remaining participants ( $n = 401$ ) was 21.2 years ( $SD = 4.5$ ) with a mean relationship length of 25.3 months ( $SD = 24.1$ ). The current research reports new analyses designed to test new hypotheses using a subset of a larger dataset described in Shackelford, Goetz, Buss, Euler and Hoier (2005).

### 2.2. Measures

All measures and procedures followed Pham et al. (2014).

#### 2.2.1. Mate retention behaviors

Participants completed the Mate Retention Inventory (MRI; Buss, 1988)—a 104-item instrument that assesses the frequency

of mate retention behaviors during the past month. On a 4-point scale, participants reported how frequently they performed each behavior (0 = *Never performed this act*, to 3 = *Often performed this act*). Following Miner et al. (2009), we constructed Benefit-Provisioning and Cost-Inflicting mate retention variables from the average of scores to specific items from the MRI.

### 2.2.2. Five-Factor model of personality

Participants completed a 40-item inventory that assesses standings on the five major dimensions of personality (Botwin et al., 1997). On a 7-point scale, participants selected responses to bipolar adjectives that described themselves (e.g., 1 = *passive*, 7 = *active*; 1 = *undependable*, 7 = *reliable*). Following Botwin et al. (1997), we constructed scores for each of the five personality dimensions (see Table 1 for dimensions and reliability coefficients). Internal consistency estimates are lower than the conventional cutoff ( $\alpha = 0.70$ ), suggesting that this instrument may have problems with regard to reliability (Cronbach, 1951). However, in previous work these bipolar adjective pairs have demonstrated internal consistency and convergent validity with the Big Five Inventory and the NEO Five Factor Inventory (Goldberg, 1992; John & Srivastava, 1999).

### 2.2.3. Oral sex

Participants provided information about their most recent sexual encounter with their partner using a 10-point scale: own interest in performing oral sex (0 = *Less interested or excited than is typical for me*, 9 = *More interested or excited than is typical for me*), and duration of oral sex (0 = *Less time than is typical for me*, 9 = *More time than is typical for me*).

## 3. Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations among the variables. Women's interest in performing fellatio was correlated with their Agreeableness (consistent with Hypothesis 1) and with their Openness to Experience. The time women spent performing fellatio was correlated with their Conscientiousness. We did not find support for Hypothesis 2: Women's Agreeableness was not correlated with the time they spent performing fellatio. We did not find support for Hypotheses 5–7: Women's Emotional Stability was not correlated with their Benefit-Provisioning, or with their interest in, or time spent, performing fellatio.

We conducted two multiple mediation analyses using a bootstrapping technique (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) to test if the mate retention domains mediated the associations between personality and interest in (model 1; Fig. 1A), and time spent (model 2; Fig. 1B) performing fellatio, while statistically controlling for participant's

age and relationship length. Both models were significant ( $ps < 0.003$ ), and each explained approximately 6% of the variance in oral sex. The first model indicated that the relationship between women's Agreeableness and their interest in performing fellatio was reduced, but not significantly (Upper 95% CI = 0.04, Lower 95% CI = -0.01), when controlling statistically for the frequency with which they provision their partner with benefits. We did not find support for Hypotheses 3 or 4: Women's Benefit-Provisioning did not mediate the relationship between women's Agreeableness and their interest in, or time spent, performing fellatio. The second model indicated that the relationship between women's Conscientiousness and the time they spend performing fellatio was reduced significantly (Upper 95% CI = 0.06, Lower 95% CI = 0.01) when controlling statistically for the frequency with which they provision their partner with benefits.

## 4. Discussion

Women's interest in, and time spent, performing fellatio are correlated with several of their personality traits and with several mate retention behaviors. Women higher in Conscientiousness spend more time performing fellatio on their partner, and this relationship is mediated by their Benefit-Provisioning mate retention. Women higher in Agreeableness report greater interest in, and time spent, performing fellatio on their partner, but not more Benefit-Provisioning. This is in contrast to the mediated relationship that Pham et al. (2014) documented in men, and is consistent with the sex differences in the relationship between oral sex and mate retention documented by Sela et al. (2015) using a different subsample of this larger dataset. This finding is also consistent with the sex differences in the relationship between oral sex and risk of partner infidelity; men, but not women, are more likely to be interested in, and spend more time performing, oral sex when they are at greater risk of their partner's infidelity (Pham, Shackelford, & Sela, 2013).

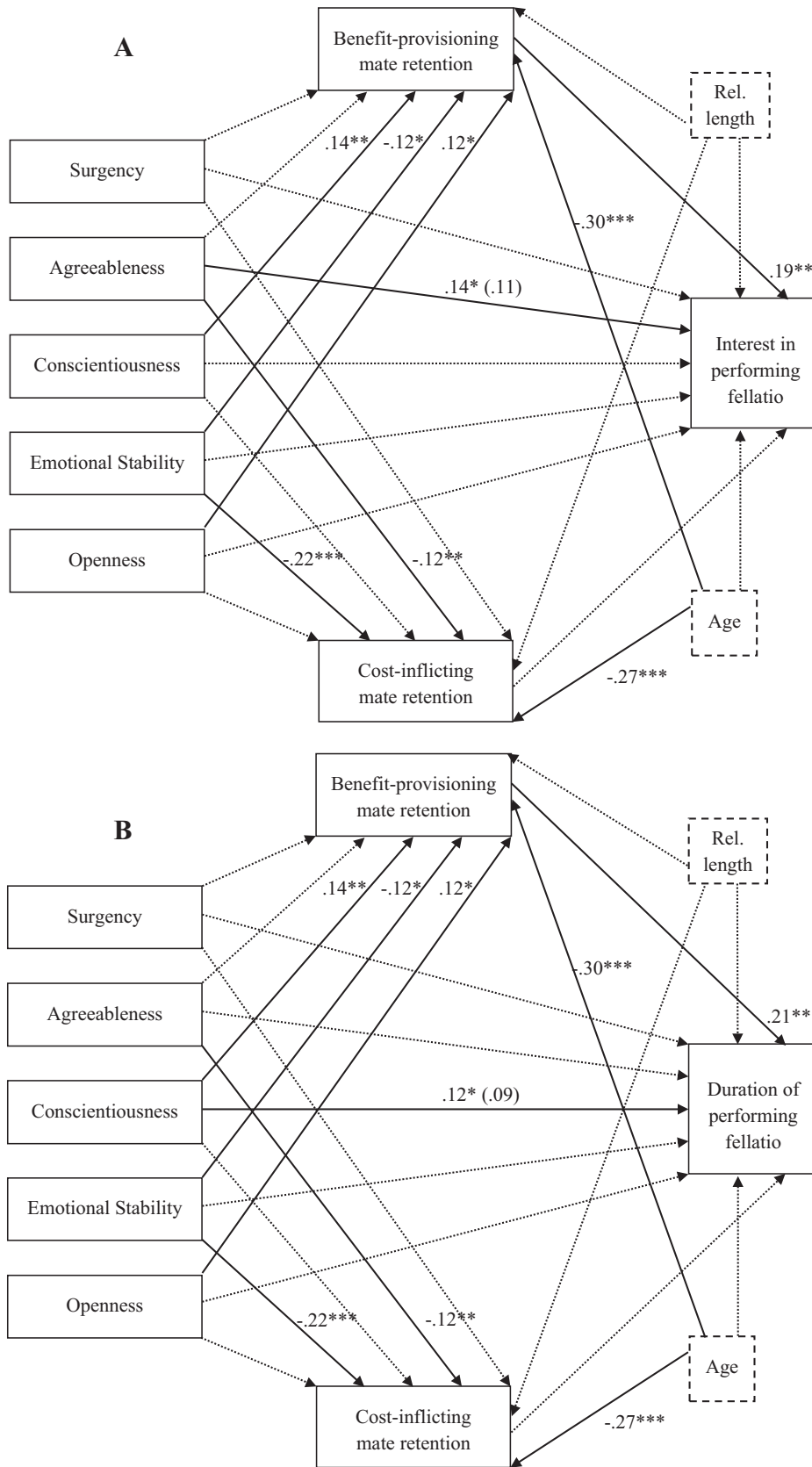
Findings for the other personality traits of women, by contrast, have not been consistently replicated. For example, women's Conscientiousness is associated with increased relationship satisfaction of their male partner in dating couples, but not married couples (Watson, Hubbard, & Wiese, 2000). Women's Openness is unrelated to male partners' relationship satisfaction in dating or married couples (Watson et al., 2000). These inconsistencies, along with the small effects identified in the current study, suggest that the identified relationships should be interpreted with caution.

We analyzed and reported analyses for all Big 5 traits for reportorial completeness and in an exploratory manner. Because no previous research has investigated these relationships, we present these analyses for all Big 5 traits in the mediational analyses. The

**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations among target variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Interest in performing fellatio	–								
2. Duration of performing fellatio	0.31**	–							
3. Surgency	0.07	0.09	0.67						
4. Agreeableness	0.16**	0.10	0.07	0.65					
5. Conscientiousness	0.10	0.14**	0.13**	0.26**	0.61				
6. Emotional Stability	0.07	0.09	0.21**	0.41**	0.17**	0.59			
7. Openness to Experience	0.13*	0.08	0.46**	0.14**	0.18**	0.05	0.52		
8. Benefit-Provisioning	0.10*	0.17**	0.06	0.05	0.13*	-0.07	0.15**	0.92	
9. Cost-Inflicting	-0.08	0.01	-0.05	-0.26**	-0.04	-0.30**	-0.05	0.57**	0.93
M	5.72	5.24	4.96	4.88	5.13	3.99	5.63	1.22	0.29
SD	2.14	2.02	0.90	0.88	0.78	0.90	0.65	0.45	0.27

Listwise  $n = 401$ , \* $p < 0.05$  (two-tailed), \*\* $p < 0.01$  (two-tailed), alpha reliabilities are on the diagonal.



**Fig. 1.** Path coefficients for the multiple mediation models are included for the direct effects (coefficients inside parenthesis) and indirect effects (coefficients outside parenthesis). Dashed boxes represent the covariates that were included in the models. Dotted lines represent non-significant path coefficients. Panels A and B summarize models 1 and 2, respectively. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .



current research extends previous research on men (Pham et al., 2014) to women. Therefore, we followed the methods and procedures of this previous research. From a theoretical perspective, personality traits are relatively stable, and therefore we reason that variation in mate retention behaviors may help to explain variation in oral sex behaviors (both of which are relatively more context-specific than are personality traits). Because our analyses are correlational, we cannot clearly identify direction of causality, and this is an interesting topic for future research.

A limitation of this study is that we did not address individual differences besides women's personality, age, and relationship length. Mate retention behaviors and oral sex behaviors are associated with individual differences such as sociosexuality (mate retention; Kardum, Hudek-Knežević, & Gračanin, 2006) and religiosity (oral sex; Mahoney, 1980). Another limitation of this study is that we relied on self-reports. Although self-reports of mate retention behaviors correlate positively with partner's reports of these behaviors (Shackelford, Goetz, & Buss, 2005), it would be useful to secure reports from both partners. We assessed performance of fellatio with a relative measure (i.e., we asked each participant to compare her interest in, and time spent, performing fellatio on her partner the last time they had sex to what is typical for her). Although this measure allowed us to control for differences between participants, future research might secure objective measures such as actual time spent performing fellatio.

The current research is the first to investigate the relationship between women's personality dimensions and oral sex behaviors. This research adds to a growing body of research documenting that mate retention strategies are associated with sexual behavior.

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