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When Looking for Love, Women Spurn Science

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Finding romantic love can be a distracting goal for anyone, but for women thoughts of romantic goals are particularly distracting from science, technology, engineering and math, new research suggests.

These [typically masculine disciplines](#) are thought of as particularly non-feminine, and women unconsciously dissociate themselves from STEM activities like college courses and majors when they need to be feminine, the researchers said.

"It says a lot about the influences of the [environment](#) that women grow up in. They are socialized and receive messages that being sexy and attractive is very important," study researcher Lora Park, at the University of Buffalo, told LiveScience. "We find that exposure to these [romantic] cues, even if they are very subtle, can affect their decision to major in these fields." [[Top 5 Myths About Girls, Math and Science](#)]

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Dating as a deterrent

The researchers found this in four separate experiments, which involved male and female participants who were about 19 years old on average. To prime participants to be in a "looking for love" or "study" mode, researchers had them rate how much they liked romance or intelligence-related images (sunset on a beach and a library, for instance); then participants filled out a questionnaire that included questions about their interest in STEM fields. After romantic prompting, female interest in such fields decreased more than 25 percent. Men didn't show any differences in STEM interest.

In a second test, the researchers staged a conversation within earshot of participants about a recent date, test or visitor. Participants then filled out another STEM preference questionnaire. When the female participants were primed with the conversation about dating, they again showed decreased [preference for STEM fields](#) compared with the students primed to think about school or a random visitor.

A third study asked 54 STEM-interested [young women](#) to fill out a questionnaire daily for 21 days. They answered questions about their romantic and intellectual pursuits and filled out a checklist of their activities, including things like "I paid attention in math class" and "today I called someone I was romantically interested in." They were also asked to rate how desirable and likeable they felt.

When the women were trying to be more desirable, they engaged in more romantic activities and fewer math activities; this even extended to the next days' activities. It didn't make a difference if the women were in steady relationships or were single.

"Women, when they were exposed to romantic cues, images in the first study and romantic conversation in other studies, showed less interest in STEM fields, and more interest in other fields, like arts and humanities," Park said. "They also showed less investment in math class activities, and were less likely to do their math homework and pay attention in math class."

Romantic pressure

A cultural focus on femininity and desirability may keep women away from fields where they are actually [equally matched with men](#), Park said.

"Women are supposed to be passive and admiring toward men, part of that could be expressing interest in these feminine fields," Park told LiveScience. "It's really about how much you endorse traditional gender role attitudes."

Park is currently investigating reasons why this might be and how it might be reversed. She notes that each woman has different reactions to the same romantic trigger. Some of the less traditional participants even had no or opposite reactions.

"The less they engage in [traditional gender roles](#), the less likely they are to show these effects," Park said.

She also notes that the findings may be slightly more nuanced than the results show, as certain STEM fields, like biology or nursing, may be considered more feminine than others, like mechanical engineering.

The findings are published in the September 2011 issue of the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

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