

Article

Social Power and Mate Attraction in Short-Term and Long-Term Relationships

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Abstract: Social power can activate behavior toward goal attainment. In the context of romantic and sexual relationships, social power may facilitate competitor derogation tactics and self-promotion tactics to attract a partner. We hypothesized that perceived invulnerability to harm would provide a pathway linking social power to competitor derogation, whereas self-perceived mate value would provide a pathway linking social power to self-promotion. Findings from 218 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 38$ years) revealed that experimentally manipulated social power enhanced perceived invulnerability, which in turn was positively associated with competitor derogation. Social power did not affect ratings of self-perceived mate value. Women more strongly endorsed self-promotion in pursuit of a short-term (vs. long-term) relationship, whereas men's ratings did not vary by relationship goal. Our findings suggested that social power may influence goal-directed thinking and behavior in the context of romantic and sexual relationships.

Keywords: social power; sexual and romantic relationships; competitor derogation; self-promotion; invulnerability; mate value



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1. Introduction

Social power refers to the perceived ability to control, influence, and evaluate others to achieve desired outcomes [1]. Social power is associated with the disinhibition of behavior directed toward goal attainment [2–5]. This disinhibition facilitates creativity [6], empathetic understanding [7], self-expression [8], positive emotion [9], health efficacy [10], and more [11,12]. Benevolent outcomes associated with social power are sometimes balanced by malevolent tendencies in the domain of sexual and romantic relationships. Social power can enhance ratings of sexual intent conveyed by ambiguous behaviors [13], which may predict miscommunications about sexual willingness that can lead to sexual violence [14]. Moreover, social power can increase risk taking [15] and perceptions that one is immune to harm [16], which may explain why powerholders sometimes engage in malevolent behavior despite the potential for retaliation. Mate attraction behavior, which refers to the strategies people employ to acquire sexual or romantic partners [17,18], may be another relational domain in which social power influences thinking and outcomes. The present research examined associations between social power and mate attraction behaviors including endorsement of competitor derogation tactics and self-promotion tactics.

1.1. Social Power and Mate Attraction Behavior

Social power facilitates goal pursuit in a variety of domains [11,12], which may include behaviors calibrated to attract a potential partner. Competitor derogation and self-promotion refer to mate attraction strategies designed to achieve the goal of obtaining a sexual or romantic partner [17–20]. Competitor derogation tactics are behaviors designed to diminish rivals' desirability, thus limiting threats to successful mate attraction [17,21].

Such behaviors can include emphasizing the rival's shortcomings (e.g., prowess, intellect, sexual history) by spreading gossip or dominating the rival in competition [17]. Self-promotion tactics are behaviors designed to enhance one's desirability to secure a partner's affection [17,18,22]. Such behaviors can include emphasizing one's unique qualities (e.g., appearance, resources, humor) through verbal or physical displays [17].

Social power might influence the extent to which people engage in competitor derogation tactics and self-promotion tactics as a means of attracting potential mates. Social power tends to orient people toward strategic thinking and behavior in pursuit of desired outcomes [4]. Behaviors that facilitate goal attainment are sometimes benevolent in nature, such as when organizational leaders must remain responsive to the needs of their subordinates to enhance team productivity [23]. Other times, goal-directed behaviors inflict a cost upon others, such as when competition is zero-sum (i.e., one person's success depends on another person's failure or defeat [24]). Mate attraction is more accurately characterized as a zero-sum pursuit in which one competitor successfully attracts a partner at the expense of rivals. Social power may disinhibit competitor derogation tactics and self-promotion tactics to facilitate goal attainment during the process of mate attraction.

1.2. Perceived Invulnerability and Mate Value

The mechanisms through which social power facilitates mate attraction might vary between competitor derogation tactics and self-promotion tactics. Competitor derogation tactics entail comparatively greater interpersonal risk, given that verbal insults toward a rival or attempts at physical domination of a rival can incur costs associated with retaliation. Social power may enhance endorsement of competitor derogation through perceived invulnerability, which refers to the belief that one is immune to harm [25]. Perceived invulnerability may be one of the mechanisms by which social power enhances risk taking [16]. People who perceive that they are invulnerable due to high social power may report a greater willingness to derogate competitors as a means of attracting a potential partner.

Engagement in self-promotion tactics requires that a person identifies his or her desirable traits. Self-perceived mate value captures the extent to which people believe they possess qualities that are attractive to potential partners [26]. Given that social power can enhance a variety of self-perceptions (e.g., self-esteem [27,28], self-confidence [29]), it may also enhance self-perceived mate value. Greater self-perceived mate value may in turn predict endorsement of self-promotion behaviors, as persons who identify desirable traits in themselves may be most prone to highlighting those traits in pursuit of a potential partner.

1.3. Effects of Participant Gender and Relationship Goal

Endorsement of mate attraction behaviors might also vary as a function of participant gender and relationship goal. Specifically, women and men may endorse different mate attraction behaviors when motivated to attract a short-term partner, but similar behaviors when motivated to attract a long-term partner. Women tend to value earnings potential in a short-term partner more so than do men, whereas men tend to value physical attractiveness in a short-term partner more so than do women [17,30]. When the goal is a short-term relationship, women might endorse more self-promotion tactics to emphasize youth and fertility, whereas men might endorse more competitor derogation tactics to emphasize social status [17].

There is greater agreement between the sexes regarding desirable traits among long-term partners. Women and men both tend to value kindness, intellect, honesty, and other traits that demonstrate the character of a long-term partner [31,32]. Given similarities between the sexes regarding preferences for a long-term mate, women and men may provide similar endorsements of mate attraction behaviors in pursuit of a long-term relationship.

2. Method

The current research used a 2 (social power: high vs. low) \times 2 (relationship goal: short-term vs. long-term) between-participants experimental design. We predicted that these

variables would influence participants' endorsement of competitor derogation tactics and self-promotion tactics in pursuit of a potential romantic partner. Further, we predicted that perceived invulnerability and self-perceived mate value would explain these relationships. We also sought to explore the interactive effects of relationship goal and participant gender on competitor derogation tactics and self-promotion tactics. This research received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at a university in the southern U.S. under the approval code LIV051922A.

2.1. Participants

Participants were 354 Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) workers who completed the study in exchange for \$0.50. Persons located in the U.S. who had completed at least 500 past studies with an approval rate of 98% or higher were eligible to participate in the present research. These a priori inclusion criteria helped to gather high-quality responses [33–36]. To further protect the quality of participant responses, we assessed participants' memory for the relationship goal (short-term vs. long-term) and the sex of the person described in the vignette (male vs. female) as attention checks. We excluded from analyses those participants who failed either memory check. The final sample consisted of $N = 218$ participants: 123 men (56%) and 95 women (44%), with a mean age of 38.60 years ($SD = 11.35$ years). Most participants indicated their race/ethnicity as White (79.82%).

2.2. Materials

Following random assignment to one of the four experimental conditions, participants self-reported their feelings of power as a manipulation check, reported their perceived invulnerability, endorsed competitor derogation and self-promotion tactics, and reported their self-perceived mate value.

2.2.1. Manipulation of Social Power

To manipulate social power, participants viewed a figure depicting a ladder accompanied by instructions to imagine that the ladder illustrated how power is distributed in society: People near the top of the ladder have the most social power, defined as the ability to control, influence, and evaluate others, whereas people at the bottom of the ladder have the least social power [10,37]. Participants received random assignment to a position of high social power ($n = 111$) or low social power ($n = 107$) indicated by a bold "X" marking their location within the power distribution (see Appendix A for figures and instructions provided to participants). Participants in the high-power condition imagined that they had "a lot of power to control, influence, and evaluate others", whereas participants in the low-power condition imagined that they had "very little power to control, influence, and evaluate others". The figure depicting participants' location within the power distribution persisted on each screen throughout the survey to maintain a constant effect of the experimental manipulation.

2.2.2. Manipulation of Relationship Goal

Participants read a vignette that contained the experimental manipulation of relationship goal. The vignette described a man (Nathan) or woman (Sophie; counterbalanced across conditions) who desired a relationship with an opposite-sex partner. In all conditions, Nathan/Sophie believed that the potential partner might be interested in pursuing a rival (Robert/Rachel), thus introducing a competitor to derogate or an enhanced motivation to self-promote.

In the short-term goal condition ($n = 100$), participants read that Nathan/Sophie desired to "hook up with, have sex with" the opposite-sex partner. In the long-term goal condition ($n = 118$), participants read that Nathan/Sophie desired to "begin a long-term relationship with, date with the eventual possibility of marriage" the opposite-sex partner. After reading the vignette, participants endorsed competitor derogation and self-promotion tactics as a means of achieving the short-term versus long-term relationship goal.

2.2.3. Measures of Competitor Derogation Tactics and Self-Promotion Tactics

Participants responded to measures of competitor derogation tactics and self-promotion tactics adapted from Buss and colleagues [17,19,38,39]. The measure of competitor derogation consisted of 13 items rated on a continuous scale from 1 (*this behavior would not help to achieve the goal*) to 7 (*this behavior would help to achieve the goal*). Items included downplaying the competitor's desirable qualities (e.g., intellect, athleticism, personality) and spreading rumors about the competitor's sexual behavior ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.75$; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.96$). The measure of self-promotion consisted of 14 items rated on the same 7-point continuous scale. Items included talking with and learning about the potential partner, using humor, and enhancing physical appearance ($M = 5.51$, $SD = 0.79$; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.83$).

2.2.4. Mediating Variables: Perceived Invulnerability and Mate Value

Perceived invulnerability refers to the extent to which people believe they are immune to harm [25]. Participants used a five-item continuous measure adapted from Lapsley and Hill [25] to report their perceived invulnerability given their random assignment to a high-power or low-power experimental condition ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.27$; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.66$). Items included "In my position on the power ladder, nothing can harm me" and "In my position on the power ladder, the opinions of other people just don't bother me".

Mate value refers to the sum of a person's qualities that influence mate attraction and retention [26]. Participants reported their self-perceived mate value using a four-item continuous measure [40] ($M = 5.13$, $SD = 1.13$; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$). Items included, "Overall, how would you rate your level of desirability as a partner on the following scale?" and "Overall, how would members of the opposite sex rate your level of desirability on the following scale?" rated from 1 (*extremely undesirable*) to 7 (*extremely desirable*).

2.3. Procedure

Eligible participants enrolled in the study via Amazon's Mechanical Turk. After providing their informed consent to continue, participants received random assignment to imagine occupying a position of high social power or low social power. Participants reported their feelings of power as a manipulation check and reported their perceived invulnerability given their position within the power distribution. Then, participants read the vignette that manipulated relationship goal (short-term vs. long-term) and counter-balanced the gender (man vs. woman) of the persons described. Participants provided their endorsements of competitor derogation tactics and self-promotion tactics. Participants reported their self-perceived mate value as well as their demographic characteristics including age, race/ethnicity, and gender. Upon completion of the study, participants read a debriefing statement and received a unique code to redeem their monetary compensation. The mean study completion time was approximately 8 min.

3. Results

Statistical analyses to test the present hypotheses included *t*-test, mediation models, and two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) [41]. All continuous variable distributions were normal, with skewness and kurtosis within the range of ± 2 requiring no transformation [42]. A post hoc power analysis conducted in G*Power Version 3.1 [43] for the largest mediation model with two predictor variables demonstrated that the analysis achieved a statistical power to detect an effect of 0.80. See Tables 1 and 2 for means and standard deviations of each dependent variable separated by condition. Data are available via the Open Science Framework (OSF: https://osf.io/853np/?view_only=7f123c8a779d415baccb547af05198a4; URL accessed on 7 May 2024).

Table 1. Means and standard deviations separated by social power condition (low vs. high). Inferential statistics represent nondirectional *t*-tests.

| Dependent Variable | Social Power Condition | | | | <i>p</i> -Value | Effect Size (<i>d</i>) |
|---------------------------|------------------------|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| | Low | | High | | | |
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | | |
| Perceived invulnerability | 3.55 | 1.21 | 4.57 | 1.10 | <0.001 | −0.88 |
| Self-perceived mate value | 5.02 | 1.18 | 5.25 | 1.06 | 0.13 | −0.21 |
| Competitor derogation | 3.88 | 1.73 | 4.01 | 1.78 | 0.56 | −0.08 |
| Self-promotion | 5.47 | 0.79 | 5.55 | 0.79 | 0.44 | −0.10 |

Table 2. Means and standard deviations separated by relationship goal condition (short-term vs. long-term). Inferential statistics represent nondirectional *t*-tests.

| Dependent Variable | Relationship Goal Condition | | | | <i>p</i> -Value | Effect Size (<i>d</i>) |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| | Short-Term | | Long-Term | | | |
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | | |
| Perceived invulnerability | 4.11 | 1.29 | 4.01 | 1.24 | 0.57 | −0.08 |
| Self-perceived mate value | 5.28 | 1.14 | 5.02 | 1.10 | 0.09 | −0.23 |
| Competitor derogation | 4.27 | 1.71 | 3.66 | 1.74 | <0.01 | −0.36 |
| Self-promotion | 5.62 | 0.76 | 5.41 | 0.81 | <0.05 | −0.28 |

3.1. Social Power Manipulation Check

A *t*-test indicated the manipulation of social power was effective (Welch's $t(154.16) = -13.12, p < 0.001, d = -1.77$). Participants assigned to the high-power condition reported greater feelings of power ($M = 5.89, SD = 0.90$) compared to participants assigned to the low-power condition ($M = 3.15, SD = 2.00$). Thus, it was appropriate to model social power (high vs. low) as an independent variable in statistical analyses.

3.2. Effects of Social Power on Mediating Variables

Social power affected perceived invulnerability ($t(216) = -6.50, p < 0.001, d = -0.88$). Participants assigned to the high-power condition reported greater perceived invulnerability ($M = 4.57, SD = 1.10$) compared to participants assigned to the low-power condition ($M = 3.55, SD = 1.21$).

The effect of social power on self-perceived mate value trended toward significance in a directional *t*-test consistent with the prediction that high power would enhance self-perceived mate value relative to low power ($t(216) = -1.53, p = 0.06, d = -0.21$). Participants assigned to the high-power condition reported marginally higher self-perceived mate value ($M = 5.25, SD = 1.06$) compared to participants in the low-power condition ($M = 5.02, SD = 1.18$). The effect of social power on self-perceived mate value was nonsignificant when modeled as a nondirectional *t*-test ($p = 0.13$).

3.3. Mediation Analyses

The first mediation model tested whether perceived invulnerability provided a pathway linking social power to endorsement of competitor derogation tactics (see Figure 1). The total effect of social power on competitor derogation tactics was nonsignificant (*c*-path; $b = 0.14, z = 0.59, p > 0.05, 95\% CI [-0.325, 0.60]$). A significant total effect is not necessary to test for mediation [44]; thus, we continued to examine the indirect effect through perceived invulnerability. The indirect effect was significant (*ab*-path; $b = 0.28, z = 2.54, p = 0.01, 95\% CI [0.07, 0.50]$). Social power increased perceived invulnerability (*a*-path; $b = 1.02, z = 6.53, p < 0.001, 95\% CI [0.71, 1.33]$), which in turn was positively associated with endorsement of competitor derogation tactics (*b*-path; $b = 0.28, z = 2.76, p = 0.006, 95\% CI [0.08, 0.48]$). Perceived invulnerability provided an indirect pathway linking social power to endorsement of competitor derogation tactics.

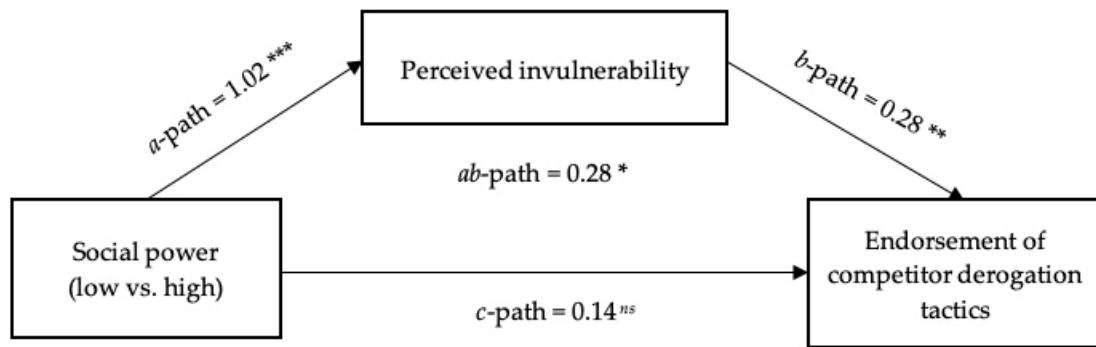


Figure 1. Testing the indirect pathway linking social power to endorsement of competitor derogation tactics through perceived invulnerability. Note. *** = $p < 0.001$, ** = $p < 0.01$, * = $p < 0.05$, ns = nonsignificant. Path coefficients represent unstandardized beta scores.

The second mediation model tested whether self-perceived mate value provided a pathway linking social power to endorsement of self-promotion tactics (see Figure 2). The total effect of social power on self-promotion tactics was nonsignificant (c -path; $b = 0.08$, $z = 0.77$, $p > 0.05$, 95% CI $[-0.13, 0.29]$). The indirect effect was nonsignificant (ab -path; $b = 0.05$, $z = 1.44$, $p > 0.05$, 95% CI $[-0.02, 0.11]$). Social power did not affect self-perceived mate value (a -path; $b = 0.23$, $z = 1.53$, $p = 0.13$, 95% CI $[-0.07, 0.53]$). However, self-perceived mate value was positively associated with endorsement of self-promotion tactics (b -path; $b = 0.20$, $z = 4.26$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI $[0.11, 0.29]$). Self-perceived mate value did not provide a significant pathway linking social power to endorsement of self-promotion tactics. See the Supplementary Materials document for results of an exploratory moderated mediation analysis [45].

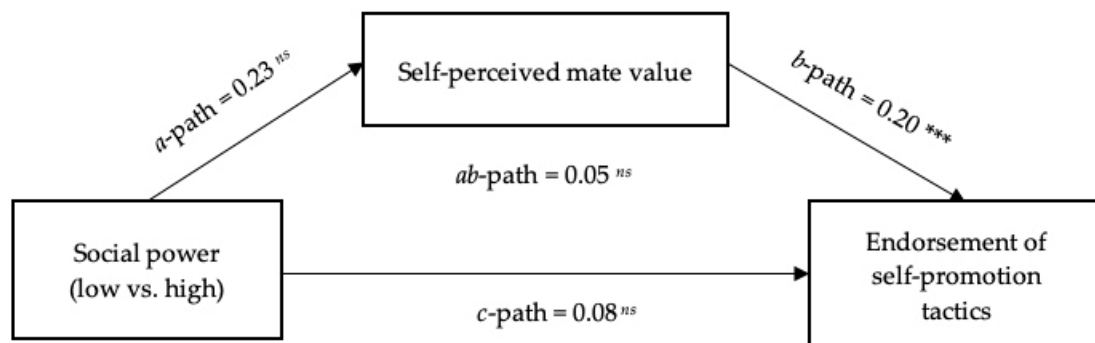


Figure 2. Testing the indirect pathway linking social power to endorsement of self-promotion tactics through self-perceived mate value. Note. *** = $p < 0.001$, ns = nonsignificant. Path coefficients represent unstandardized beta scores.

3.4. Effects of Relationship Goal and Participant Gender on Endorsement of Competitor Derogation Tactics and Self-Promotion Tactics

The first ANOVA model examined the effects of relationship goal (short-term vs. long-term) and participant gender on endorsement of competitor derogation tactics. The analysis revealed a main effect of relationship goal on endorsement of competitor derogation tactics ($F(1,214) = 7.60$, $p = 0.006$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$; see Figure 3). Participants in the short-term goal condition ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 1.71$) reported greater endorsement of competitor derogation tactics compared to participants in the long-term goal condition ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.74$). Exploratory analyses revealed that married participants more strongly endorsed competitor derogation ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.74$) compared to unmarried participants ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.74$; $t(216) = -2.10$, $p = 0.04$, $d = -0.29$). The model did not reveal any other main effects or interactions.

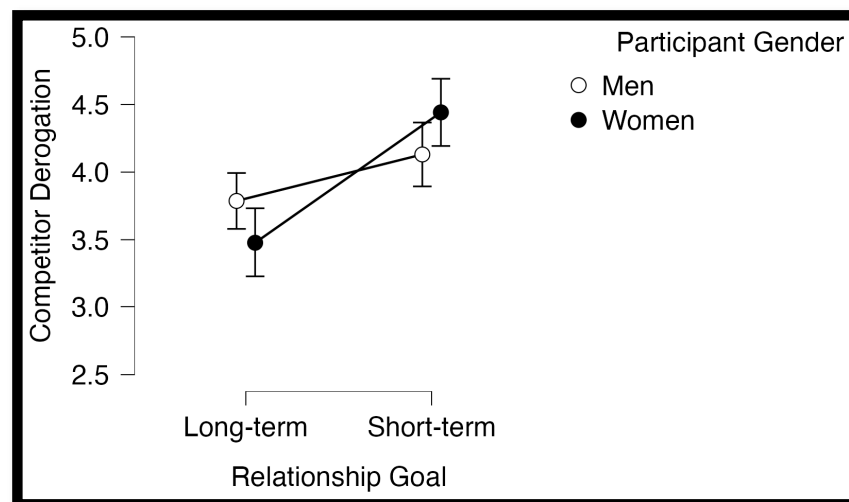


Figure 3. Testing the interaction between relationship goal (short-term vs. long-term) and participant gender on endorsement of competitor derogation tactics. Bars represent standard error around the mean.

The second ANOVA model examined the effects of relationship goal (short-term vs. long-term) and participant gender on endorsement of self-promotion tactics. The analysis revealed a main effect of relationship goal on endorsement of self-promotion tactics ($F(1,214) = 4.58, p = 0.03, \eta_p^2 = 0.02$). Participants in the short-term goal condition ($M = 5.62, SD = 0.76$) reported greater endorsement of self-promotion tactics compared to participants in the long-term goal condition ($M = 5.41, SD = 0.81$). This main effect was qualified by a trending two-way interaction ($F(1,214) = 2.91, p = 0.09, \eta_p^2 = 0.01$; see Figure 4). Women reported greater endorsement of self-promotion tactics in the short-term relationship goal condition ($M = 5.80, SD = 0.67$) compared to the long-term relationship goal condition ($M = 5.39, SD = 0.68; t(93) = -2.98, p = 0.004, d = -0.61$). However, men's endorsement of self-promotion tactics did not vary across levels of relationship goal ($t(121) = -0.30, p > 0.05, d = -0.05$).

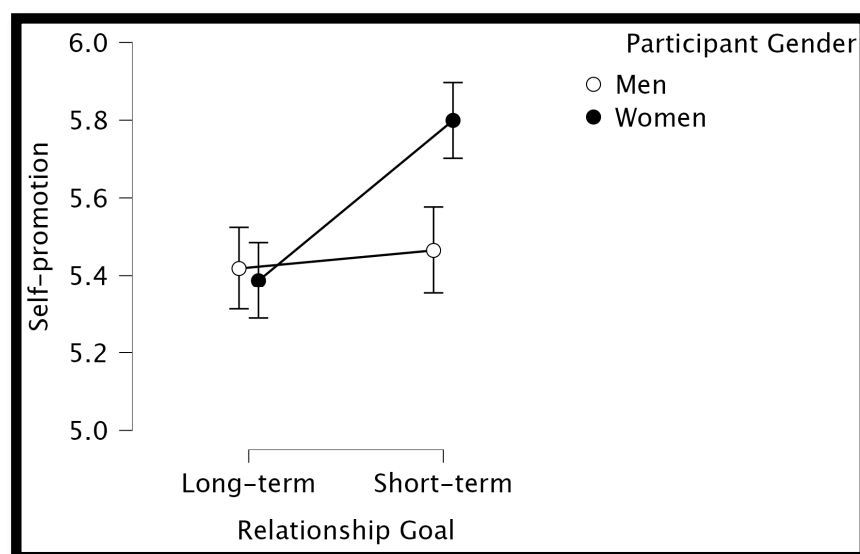


Figure 4. Testing the interaction between relationship goal (short-term vs. long-term) and participant gender on endorsement of self-promotion tactics. Bars represent standard error around the mean.

4. Discussion

This research investigated the association between social power and mate attraction behaviors through perceived invulnerability and self-perceived mate value. Findings indicated that perceived invulnerability provided a pathway linking greater social power to increased endorsement of competitor derogation tactics. Self-perceived mate value did not provide a pathway linking social power to endorsement of self-promotion tactics. However, self-perceived mate value was positively associated with endorsement of self-promotion tactics.

Additionally, the present study examined effects of long-term versus short-term relationship goals and participant gender on endorsement of competitor derogation tactics and self-promotion tactics. Short-term (vs. long-term) relationship goals predicted greater endorsement of both competitor derogation tactics and self-promotion tactics. Moreover, whereas men's endorsements of self-promotion tactics did not vary depending on relationship goal, women expressed greater endorsement of self-promotion tactics in the context of a short-term versus a long-term relationship goal. These findings reveal features of the person and the social situation that influence mate attraction behavior and elucidate the mechanisms that might explain associations between social power and relationship outcomes.

4.1. Predictors of Competitor Derogation

Social power predicted endorsement of competitor derogation tactics indirectly through perceived invulnerability. Although social power can motivate benevolent behaviors in some group contexts [7], its effects in sexual contexts can be somewhat malevolent [46–49]. For instance, powerholders tend to perceive that subordinates are physically attractive [47] and rate others as more willing to engage in sex [13]. They sometimes exploit their positions to coerce persons into engaging in sexual activity [46,50]. The present findings comport with prior research to suggest that power can disinhibit competitor derogation tactics through perceived invulnerability as a means of limiting threats to attracting a desired mate. Power tends to enhance risk taking [15], which may include derogating competitors by highlighting their shortcomings despite the potential for retaliation. Perceived invulnerability provided a pathway linking social power to competitor derogation: Powerholders tended to feel immune to harm, which in turn predicted endorsement of competitor derogation tactics. Given their high-level position in a social hierarchy, powerholders may believe that they are insulated from the potential costs of derogating rivals. The positive association between perceived invulnerability and competitor derogation suggests directions for future research to examine other variables that might predict perceived invulnerability—such as wealth or reputation—which could be associated indirectly with malevolent relationship behaviors. Competitor derogation may be more likely among the powerful (vs. powerless) due to their greater sense of invulnerability to harm.

Relationship goal also affected endorsements of competitor derogation tactics. Compared to long-term relationship goals (i.e., to attract a partner for dating with the possibility of marriage), short-term relationship goals (i.e., to attract a partner for sexual gratification) were associated with greater endorsement of competitor derogation. Women and men may be more willing to deploy derogation tactics as a means of securing a short-term relationship because the desire for sex directs attention toward shortsighted goal pursuit [51–53]. Primed with the objective of sexual gratification, people may be willing to engage in risky, immoral, or unethical behaviors they would otherwise forgo [54,55]. Women and men whose goal is to begin a long-term relationship that may result in marriage might believe that the basis of such a relationship should be compatibility [56], and thus they may be less willing to derogate competitors to attract a long-term partner. Persons seeking long-term relationships might desire for their partner to be attracted to them rather than repelled by others, the latter of which is a goal of competitor derogation. Competitor derogation may be more likely in pursuit of a short-term relationship versus a long-term relationship.

4.2. Predictors of Self-Promotion

Self-perceived mate value was positively associated with endorsement of self-promotion tactics. Mate value refers to the extent to which a person possesses qualities that are attractive to potential partners [26,57]. Persons who perceive that their characteristics are desirable to others may be more willing to self-promote because they expect to receive a positive response from a prospective romantic partner [58]. This reinforcement might produce a feedback loop such that higher ratings of self-perceived mate value predict greater willingness to self-promote, which results in greater mating success and thus higher self-perceived mate value. Future research could examine this proposition by experimentally manipulating self-promotion behavior and measuring mate attraction success and subsequent changes in self-perceived mate value. Although self-perceived mate value can be influenced by contextual factors such as experimental priming manipulations [59], it is often considered an individual difference that remains somewhat stable across situations [40,60]. Relative stability in self-perceived mate value may help to explain why this variable was unaffected by the present experimental manipulation of social power, and thus why self-perceived mate value did not offer an indirect pathway linking social power to endorsement of self-promotion tactics. Persons with higher self-perceived mate value tend to believe they are attractive to potential partners, facilitating their self-promotion of desirable traits.

Endorsements of self-promotion tactics also varied depending on participant gender and relationship goal. Women tended to more strongly endorse self-promotion in the context of a short-term versus a long-term relationship goal, whereas men's endorsements of self-promotion did not vary across levels of relationship goal. The present findings are somewhat inconsistent with prior research demonstrating that men compared to women judged some self-promotion tactics to be more effective [22]. Moreover, compared to women, men tend to pursue short-term sexual strategies to a greater extent given men's relatively low costs associated with reproduction [61]. Future research should attempt to replicate the present pattern of results, which suggested that women may be more amenable to self-promotion in the context of a short-term versus a long-term relationship. Moreover, the stability of men's endorsement of self-promotion across levels of relationship goal suggests that other factors, such as partner attractiveness or individual differences, might motivate men's self-promotion. Women may be more likely to self-promote in pursuit of a short-term (vs. long-term) relationship because they believe men will respond favorably to these tactics.

4.3. Limitations and Future Directions

The present research is not without limitations that future investigations may address. The experimental manipulation of social power did not influence self-perceived mate value, contrary to the prediction that high (vs. low) social power would increase ratings. Although mate value is generally conceived of as an individual difference variable with stability across contexts [40,60], experimental manipulations supported by theory have influenced participant ratings [59]. The present study measured self-perceived mate value as part of a demographics questionnaire to which participants responded near the end of the survey, after the effects of the experimental manipulation may have subsided. Future research should measure self-perceived mate value immediately following a manipulation of social power to provide a true test of the hypothesis that social power can affect ratings. Additionally, future research might employ alternative manipulations of social power that might produce larger effects [62] or simply measure, rather than manipulate, participants' real-world power dynamics [63]. Attempts at conceptual replication using varied methodologies can strengthen and extend the present findings.

The model testing self-perceived mate value as a mediator of the effect of social power on endorsement of self-promotion tactics lacked temporal precedence [64], which may have threatened the validity of its specification. Although the model specification was theoretically supported [27–29,65], a future investigation that assesses self-perceived mate

value after the manipulation of social power but before the measure of self-promotion tactics can offer more compelling evidence regarding the nature of the relationship between these variables. By contrast, the model testing perceived invulnerability as a mediator was constructed with temporal precedence [66].

Future research should examine effects of social power on mate guarding behaviors. Mate guarding refers to strategies intended to maintain a relationship and prevent external threats from rivals [67]. Behaviors such as wearing a wedding ring (i.e., possessive ornamentation), checking in with a partner via call or text (i.e., vigilance), and attending prolonged events together (i.e., monopolization of time) are examples of mate guarding [68]. The association between social power and mate guarding behavior might be characterized by competing hypotheses. One possibility is that powerholders, confident in their desirable qualities, may endorse fewer mate guarding behaviors relative to the powerless. Lower levels of jealousy among powerholders might mediate this relationship. Alternatively, another possibility is that power might disinhibit malevolent relationship behaviors, as it did in the present research, and contribute to enhanced mate guarding behaviors in attempt to actively secure an existing relationship.

5. Conclusions

Although social power facilitates benevolent outcomes in some domains [6–10], it might disinhibit malevolent tendencies in the context of romantic and sexual relationships [13,46–49]. The present research examined the association between social power and mate attraction behaviors; namely, endorsements of competitor derogation tactics and self-promotion tactics. Social power was associated with competitor derogation through perceived invulnerability (i.e., the belief that one is immune to harm [25]), perhaps because the powerful felt insulated from risk associated with derogating rivals. Self-perceived mate value was positively associated with endorsement of self-promotion tactics. Participants expressed stronger endorsement of competitor derogation tactics in pursuit of a short-term versus a long-term relationship. Women expressed stronger endorsement of self-promotion tactics in pursuit of a short-term (vs. long-term) relationship, whereas men's endorsement of self-promotion did not vary across levels of relationship goal. Social power may influence thinking and behavior in the context of romantic and sexual relationships.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/sexes5040033/s1>. Exploratory moderated mediation analysis document.

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Appendix A

The manipulation of power instrument was adapted from Goodman and colleagues [37]. This instrument asked participants to imagine that they occupied a position of high-power or low-power according to random assignment, as follows.

Instructions:

Imagine that the ladder below pictures *how power is distributed in society*.

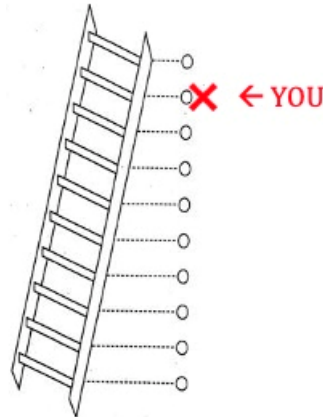
At the top of the ladder are people with the *most power*: They have the *most* control, influence, and ability to evaluate others.

At the bottom are people with the *least power*: They have the *least* control, influence, and ability to evaluate others.

High-power condition:

Imagine that your position in social life is near the top of the power ladder. You have a lot of power to control, influence, and evaluate others.

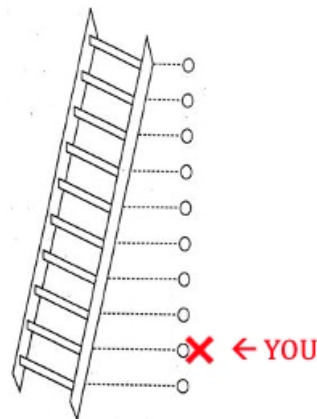
As you complete the survey, you will need to remember that *your position is near the top of the ladder: You have a lot of power*.



Low-power condition:

Imagine that your position in social life is near the bottom of the power ladder. You have very little power to control, influence, and evaluate others.

As you complete the survey, you will need to remember that *your position is near the bottom of the ladder: You have very little power*.



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