



Brief Reports

Mercenary predators: Individual characteristics of gold diggers

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ABSTRACT

Gold digging was conceptualized as a mating strategy distinct from a mere preference for partners with many resources. While life history theory is used as a meta-framework, additional environmental cues are used to describe gold digging more precisely in the context of sexual strategies. The study further addressed whether gold digging, often stereotyped as female behavior, is in fact not limited to women. Participants ($N = 351$) completed an ipsative measure assessing their preference for materialistic advantages versus intimacy-oriented partners, and reported personality, societal, and mating-market characteristics. The ipsative method showed convergent validity via date-investment items. Gold diggers were female, reckless (i.e., psychopathic), narcissistic, lived in larger cities, and students. Female, right-wing students scored highest in gold digging, consistent with increased access to resourceful partners. Left-wing men reported the highest self-rated mate value, linked to high psychopathy, a finding discussed in context of deceitful sexual strategies.

“She take my money when I’m in need”

(*Gold Digger*; Kanye West & Jamie Foxx, 2005)

The song captures three core elements of the public conception of gold diggers. Exploiting others, avoiding poor mates, being female (Thompson, 2019). While selecting partners based on resources is a well-known strategy (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000), this characterization has limits. First, less or non-wealthy individuals can also be exploited (e.g., via debts or bank access; Kutin, 2020); second, resource-oriented dating must not be limited to women. Its materialistic-exploitative behaviors mark gold digging as a fast life strategy, emphasizing short-term mating and resource-extraction (Ellis et al., 2009). Yet, gold diggers seek resources (e.g., money, status) but not reproduction—requiring a nuanced life history strategy calibration via self-centered (i.e., narcissistic) and reckless (i.e., psychopathic) over reciprocal decisions (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). Life history speed depends on environmental cues; thus, context (e.g., city size, actively studying) and individual factors (i.e., personality, political orientation, mate value) must be considered when exploring individual differences in gold diggers. Gold digging was operationalized with dichotomous choices balancing intimate-focused and materialistic options, based on partner preferences (Li & Kenrick, 2006).

Going beyond resource preferences (Li & Kenrick, 2006), trading off personal connection is labeled as gold digging (Thompson, 2019) within

broader sexual strategies (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). Materialistic individuals even exploit poor mates (Kutin, 2020). Recklessness is a psychopathic characteristic (Patrick et al., 2009). Psychopathy, and the other Dark Tetrad traits of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and sadism are fast life strategies, trading risks for reproductive success (Freyth et al., 2027). Charming and impressive individuals (e.g., narcissists) might choose from a larger partner pool, facilitating gold digging, while tacticians (i.e., Machiavellians) might prioritize general life decisions and therefore be less attracted to gold digging.

A life history calibration requires environmental and individual differences to be explored more deeply. While higher population density (i.e., cities) typically signals slower life histories (Ellis et al., 2009), economically unrestrained areas trigger fast life strategies, mostly because of social competition for survival and reproduction (Sng et al., 2017). Thus, gold digging might be more common in cities than on the countryside as more potentially exploitable individuals live there. Further, students might have more opportunities for gold digging as they have high mate value for being in their reproductive prime and educated (Li & Kenrick, 2006), and as universities also offer several social occasions for socializing with a broader audience (e.g., semester openings, events). In times of high politicization and polarization (Wagner, 2024), political preferences might also affect different sexual strategies: left-wing individuals show more sociosexual behaviors (i.e., fast life

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history; Hatemi et al., 2017) tend towards compassion, security, and fairness, while right-wing individuals are more industrious and are probably more resourceful (Graham et al., 2011; Hirsh et al., 2010). However, gold diggers can also report political preferences strategically to access industrious and resourceful mates (i.e., right-wing).

Individuals need sufficient mate value to secure partners. More attractive individuals demand more desirable partners, suggesting a mate value–gold digging link. Yet, assortative mating extends beyond physical attractiveness to political views (Huber & Malhotra, 2017). However, as the Zeitgeist in media and academia is predominantly left-wing (roughly 95%, Haubrich, 2020; Inbar & Lammers, 2012), this could imply left-wing identification partly functions as empathy-signaling in mating contexts (Miller, 2007). Deliberately signaling empathy and vulnerability may represent a deceptive mating strategy (Saad, 2020).

1. Methods

1.1. Participants and procedure

To detect medium effect sizes ($\alpha = 0.05$, power = 0.95) in an ANOVA (within-between interaction) a sample size of 279 was required ($f = 0.25$, numerator = 3, number of groups = 12; G*Power); for correlations by sex ($\rho = 0.30$) 138 participants were needed. Data of 351 participants (105 men, 241 women; 10 excluded for $t < 5$ min) were collected online through a German psychology master class in statistics (https://osf.io/um26f/overview?view_only=ea5320107f0e4da09f7cf8939f6fd5a0) aged $M = 30.21$ years ($SD = 13.37$; no incentive). Participants provided informed consent before the study began, and were debriefed and thanked after the end. Ethical clearance was given by the Bess Institute's board.

1.2. Measures

Gold digging tendencies were assessed with a 15-item ipsative measure. Each item presented a forced choice between an intimacy-focused partner or behavior versus a more agentic or materialistic option (e.g., “A wealthy but faithful partner” vs. “A faithful but financially unreliable partner”). A score was created by adding up the pro-materialistic decisions and subtracting the double score of the pro-intimate decisions. Further, two items on the expectations for a romantic date were used to test the validity of the gold digging score (“Unplanned, spontaneous meet-up” vs. “Elaborately prepared date”; “Private date at home” vs. “Public date with social engagement.”).

Personality was captured via the Short-Dark Tetrad (Paulhus et al., 2020). Participants reported their agreement (1 = *completely disagree*; 5 = *completely agree*) with statements assessing narcissism (e.g., “I have some exceptional qualities”; $\alpha = 0.70$), Machiavellianism (e.g., “Manipulating the situation takes planning”; $\alpha = 0.65$), psychopathy (e.g., “People who mess with me always regret it”; $\alpha = 0.73$), and sadism (e.g., “Some people deserve to suffer”; $\alpha = 0.74$). Items were averaged into indices.

Participants reported their sex, sexual orientation (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, other), size of place of residence (rural $\leq 100,000$, city = 100,000 to 500,000, metropole = above 500,000), political orientation (4-point Likert scale), active study (“I am an active student”: yes/no), financial situation (5-point Likert scale), and self-rated mate value (1 to 10). Sexual orientation was transformed into a binary variable (heterosexual/non-heterosexual) with 41 individuals reporting to being homosexual or bisexual of which only 5 were men. Thus, no ANOVA including sexual orientation was calculated. As only 12 individuals reported to be right-wing, they were merged with the mid-right group. Wealth was dichotomized intentionally to be used for ANOVAs (having financial stress vs. not having financial trouble). The sample was young, leftist, and wealthy.

2. Results

Sex differences were found in narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and sadism, but also detected in gold digging with women scoring higher than men (Table 1). For the non-metric variables, Chi-squared-tests were calculated: Men and women did not differ in the size of their center of living, wealth, nor whether they studied or not, but in sexual ($\chi^2 = 24.41$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = 0.27$) and political orientation ($\chi^2 = 7.23$, $p < .001$, $\phi = 0.15$) as more women were non-heterosexual and men more right-leaning.

Next, correlations of gold digging with personality, dating investment expectations, and demographics were calculated. Overall, gold digging was positively associated to the city size ($r = 0.11$, $p = .03$), sexual orientation (being non-heterosexual; $r = 0.13$, $p = .02$), narcissism ($r = 0.15$, $p < .01$), and psychopathy ($r = 0.15$, $p < .01$). In both sexes, gold digging is linked to narcissism, psychopathy, date investment expectations, and mate value, (Table 2) among women also with sadism. No moderation by sex was found except for studying as female students scored higher than male students (Fisher's $z = 2.07$, $p = .04$).

To test if gold digging differed further by demographics a 2 (sex) \times 2 (studying) \times 2 (political orientation) ANOVA was conducted, observing 2 interactional and 2 main effects. The main effects showed higher scores in women and students. A two-way interaction ($F[1, 338] = 43.02$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$) confirmed the moderation by sex as female students scored highest on gold digging among all groups. A three-way interaction ($F[1, 338] = 28.23$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$) indicated that this effect was mainly driven by right-wing female students scoring higher compared to each other group. Despite only 13 female students (Table S1) reported to be right-wing, based on the previous analyses and theory, the ANOVA was used for theoretical reasons but should be replicated by future research. To confirm the model, Kruskal-Wallis tests were calculated, confirming the main effects on sex ($H(1) = 12.14$, $p < .001$, rank $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$) and studying ($H(1) = 16.31$, $p < .001$, rank $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$).

For exploratory reasons, if self-described mate value differed by sex and political orientation a 2 \times 3 ANOVA was conducted. Neither main effects, nor an interaction ($F[2, 337] = 6.38$, $p = .15$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$) was observed. Yet, descriptively left-wing men ($n = 24$) scored highest at $M = 8.17$ compared to the other groups (range $M = 7.34$ to 7.71). Even when controlled for wealth, sex-specific Dark Tetrad-politic associations with mate value (Table S2) revealed that narcissists universally rated themselves as high in mate value. Psychopathic left-wing and mid-left men showed the same pattern.

3. Discussion

This study examined individual differences associated with gold digging as a mating tactic. Gold digging was conceptualized as an exploitative strategy beyond a simple preference for resourceful partners, involving explicit trade-off between intimacy and material

Table 1
Sex differences in demographics and personality.

	M(SD)		t	d
	Men	Women		
Narcissism	9.32(0.64)	2.56(0.60.)	5.18**	0.61
Machiavellianism	3.22(0.57)	2.98(0.61)	3.43**	0.40
Psychopathy	2.45(0.65)	2.02(0.63)	5.73**	0.67
Sadism	2.84(0.76)	2.09(0.61)	9.68**	1.13
Date investment	-1.65(1.58)	-1.52(1.68)	-0.65	-0.08
Mate value	7.71(1.91)	7.50(1.77)	0.96	0.11
Gold digging	4.09(2.12)	4.93(2.13)	-3.39**	-0.40

Note: Categorical variables are reported via χ^2 -tests in the text.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$.

Table 2
Association between gold digging and attitudes and personality.

	<i>r</i>	
	Men	Women
Narcissism	0.23*	0.22**
Machiavellianism	>−0.01	0.10
Psychopathy	0.29*	0.19*
Sadism	0.14	0.23**
Date investment	0.37**	0.49**
Sexual orientation	0.13	0.10
Political orientation	0.03	0.04
Center of living	0.16*	0.11
Studying	<0.001	−0.24**
Mate value	0.23*	0.20*
Wealth	−0.08	0.02

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .05$.

benefits, captured via an ipsative method. Gold diggers expected higher date investment, providing evidence of convergent validity. The findings suggest that gold digging is not solely a stereotype about money-oriented women but a broader, psychopathy-linked social tactic.

Overall, women, narcissists, psychopaths, individuals with mate value, those living in cities, and students showed more gold digging. Female sadists also tended more towards gold digging. Accordingly, gold digging is not a uniquely female tactic, but also involves an exploitative component (i.e., psychopathy, female sadists) going beyond resource-oriented mating (Li & Kenrick, 2006). A certain complexity in gold digging becomes observable as narcissists might tend more towards gold digging as they have more access to desirable mates based on their charming appearance; in contrast, Machiavellians do not tend towards gold digging. This may reflect that Machiavellians, as long-term strategists, avoid the reckless short-term tactics implied in gold digging.

In a more detailed analysis, female students scored higher in gold digging when they were right-wing. Probably, right-wing individuals are more industrious (Hirsh et al., 2010), even successful, and therefore more desirable as mates, or gold diggers self-identify as right-wing to access resourceful mates. In contrast, leftist men—but not women—report higher self-described mate value, but not higher levels of gold digging. One tentative interpretation is that among men left-wing identification may partly as sexual signaling to appear compassionate and vulnerable (i.e., kleptogamy or “sneaky fuckers”; Saad, 2020).

Despite expected sex differences (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000; Li & Kenrick, 2006), effects on population density and studying support regarding gold digging as a context-calibrated sexual strategy. This finds further support as interactional effects were limited (e.g., in cities; Sng et al., 2017). Future research should test additional environmental cues and replicate left-wing men's patterns in larger samples.

4. Limitations

Despite valid ipsative measuring of gold digging, the correlational design limits its causal interpretation. The predominantly left-wing, female, German student sample lacks demographic balance. Ipsative choices may lack nuances of Likert scales. Young educated students might overrepresent gold digging compared to non-students, exploiting the mating market alongside the labor market.

5. Conclusion

Gold digging was emerged as an exploitative mating strategy beyond a simple preference for resourceful partners. It was observed among both sexes—despite women were more likely to be gold diggers. Psychopathy (i.e., recklessness), high mate value, and in favorable mating-market positions characterized gold diggers. Left-leaning men may use political affiliation as a form of deceitful sexual signaling.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Lennart Freyth: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Peter K. Jonason:** Supervision, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2026.113817>.

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