

# "A Penny Saved is a Partner Earned: The Romantic Appeal of Savers."

Hi, my name is Jenny Olson. And I am a PhD candidate in Marketing at the University of Michigan. And today I'm going to be talking a little bit about my research which looks at the relative desirability of saving versus spending in romantic relationships. And so when we think about going out on a first date, a lot of times we're really concerned about what we look like. We want to dress up and maybe spend a little bit more money on a nice outfit, or a nice vehicle, a nice restaurant. And all of these things suggest that we should spend money. And lo and behold, a recent Wall Street Journal article indeed suggests that people should, essentially, burn a big pile of money on the first date because it conveys not only wealth, but access to resources, which is presumably desirable. And so there is some research in consumer behavior and marketing that suggests that when men in particular are motivated by romantic attraction, they tend to show a greater willingness to spend on expensive flashy items and less so on less flashy, inconspicuous items. And so to the best of my knowledge, there is one study out there that looks at an implication of this kind of spending behavior in the romantic domain. And these authors find that when women have information about a single purchase, they tend to view a man who recently spent a lot of money on something like a Porsche Boxster as more desirable as a dating partner than that same man who spent a little bit less money on something a little bit more conservative like a Honda Civic.

So the economists tell us we should spend a lot of money. And there's evidence suggesting that men do in fact spend a lot of money and that women find this desirable. Well, I'm going to turn that conventional wisdom on its head and argue that saving money is actually more desirable in a romantic partner than spending money. Because one could argue that spending a lot of money might be perceived as wasteful or indulgent or potentially materialistic. And those things aren't necessarily desirable in a mate. Instead, knowing that someone has the resources to be able to afford to purchase things, but chooses not to and instead shows a little bit of spending restraint might actually be more desirable in a partner. And so in my own research, I look at the other side of spending, which is the saving, and whether or not that is more desirable in a mate.

Now I want to make two points here. First, I'm not talking about the extreme ends of a spending continuum where we have the degenerate gamblers and the pathological hoarders. Instead I'm focusing on the middle distribution, or the people that we're more likely to encounter on a daily basis and potentially develop a romantic relationship with. And second, there are a lot of dimensions to being what I term saver or a spender. For instance, spending money on yourself versus others might make a difference. Likewise, saving up for a luxurious vacation is very different than saving up for a down payment on the home. And so in my own work, I focus on just the simple label of being a saver or spender so that later in my future work I can look at these other kinds of dimensions. And so in my work, I'm going to argue that saving is more desirable because of perceptions of general self-control. And there's a growing body of literature suggesting that self-control is a very desirable quality in a mate. For instance, having a partner that has self-control, they're less likely to say hurtful things or engage in infidelity. They're also more likely to keep promises. They're also more likely to show accommodating responses in the face of conflict. So if you're arguing with someone that has self-control, they might be able to bite their tongue a little bit more. And finally, having a partner that has general self-control may also help you achieve your own goals that require self-control. So someone to

kind of warn me to stop Netflix binging or avoid that second donut. And so I'm going to argue that savers are more desirable than spenders because of the self-control. And so I conducted a series of experiments where I use an online dating profile paradigm. So participants were randomly assigned to view the profile of someone that said I'm a saver or a spender. And the only other information they received about the individual was that they were in their twenties, single, and employed full-time.

So for the first experiment, I randomly assign people to view someone that said that they would spend \$250 of \$1,000 windfall. Or they would spend \$750 of \$1,000 windfall. And consistent with my theorizing, I find that the person who was going to spend less and essentially save more of that windfall was perceived as more desirable than the person who was going to spend a little bit more. I also included a variety of different ways of explaining my saving and spending habits-- so I love saving, I hate saving, I love spending, hate spending, I find it hard to save, I find it hard to spend-- to again, test the robustness of the effect. And what I find is that regardless of how someone expresses their habits, saving was more attractive than the control and spending was less attractive than the control. So now the next question is, well, why?

Why are savers more desirable than spenders? And so the next couple experiments I looked at perceptions of general self-control. In addition, it's possible that savers might be seen as less materialistic and as having greater future financial viability. And what I find is that it is indeed perceptions of general self-control which predicts the effect of spending habits on attractiveness above and beyond these other alternative explanations. So we have some evidence that general self-control is really driving the effect. So up until this point, I've been talking about romantic attraction. How romantically attractive do you find this person? You know, and I find that savers are perceived as more romantically attractive because they're perceived as having greater general self-control. Someone that's stable, secure, the person we're supposed to marry and have a family with.

However, your intuition may be a little bit different for perceptions of physical appeal. We all probably have an instance or two in life where we were attracted to someone we probably shouldn't have been, like that bad boy or the bad girl. But because I'm talking about perceptions of general self-control, my theoretical framework has a novel implication. People who have self-control might be expected to take better care of themselves, eat more healthy, and actually engage in more proper hygienic processes, which actually have direct implications on outward appearance. So oddly enough, saving may actually signal, again, perceptions of greater self control, which have direct implications on outward appearance.

And so in the next study, I looked at-- I again used the exact same photos I had been using with the romantic attraction. But this time I had individuals evaluate how physically attractive they found the person. But, again, it's possible that savers might be perceived as superior on all sorts of dimensions. Maybe savers are not only more physically appealing, but they're also more fun and exciting and humorous and intelligent. And to kind of address this possible halo effect, I also had people not only evaluate how physically attractive, but also how exciting is this person. Because remember, we're talking about self-control. And self-control is normally a process that favors prudence over fun. So one dimension in which savers should not exceed spenders on is excitement. And consistent with the self-control explanation, I find that savers, again, the exact same photo labeled saver, was perceived as physically more attractive than the exact same photo labeled spender. But, savers were perceived as significantly less exciting, consistent with the self-control explanation. So up until this point, I have demonstrated that saving is more desirable because of perceptions of general self-control, which also

extends into the physical domain. So there's going to be situations in which savers might not be preferred. Because self-control is a force that naturally favors prudence over fun, it's possible that there are situations in which when people desire more excitement. They may not prefer the saver.

And so the last two experiments, I look at two boundary conditions. One is the anticipated length of the relationship. So when you think about savers, you think longer term, marriage. But what about those shorter term encounters? You know, I just want to have someone to have a good time with tonight. And there we're thinking about physical attractiveness as well as excitement. And because savers have the advantage on physical appeal, but a large deficit on the excitement, I didn't expect to find a difference there. And that is what I find is that savers are generally appealing, but not universally. In situations in which we're thinking in terms of a short term fling, saving is not more desirable. Likewise, we differ in our tolerance for boredom or the extent to which we're willing to sacrifice self-control for excitement. And so I measured individuals own level of boredom susceptibility. And I find that people who are more likely to experience boredom and really don't like predictability, they also do not prefer the saver. Up until this point, I've been looking at dating profiles in which the target individual either says I'm a saver or a spender. But you might be wondering, well, how am I going to know this about somebody unless they explicitly tell me? Is there are a situation in which maybe I'm going out for the evening and I want to be able to identify who's a saver or a spender in the wild?

I'm going to argue that it is possible to identify people's general spending habits simply by looking at them and without any kind of verbal communication. And so what I did is I ran a study. And I brought in people to the lab. And I had them first complete a getting-to-know-you survey in which they privately identified themselves as a saver or a spender. Then I told them that we were going to do a person perception task in which they were going to look around the room and guess whether or not every other person in that room was a saver or a spender. And everyone was paid \$1.00 for every correct guess. So it was an incentive compatible experiment. And so people were using the consumption cues that were visible. So things like hairstyle, necklaces, earrings, all of these things we use to kind of convey who we are might also offer information about our spending habits. And what I find is that people's snap judgments were incredibly accurate. So there was a significant correlation between what people said they were and the average inference of others, what they thought that the person was. And so snap judgments, indeed, were accurate.

So in sum, my research finds that saving not only has obvious financial benefits, it also has surprising interpersonal benefits. So spending a lot of money to get a first date probably isn't wise because it conveys a lack of self-control. And so savers are more desirable both in terms of romantic appeal and physical appeal because of their perceived greater self-control. And finally, of course, there are situations in which savers may not be preferred to spenders, situations which people are craving excitement or simulation. Those are circumstances in which saving may not be preferred. So the last thing I want to leave you with is kind of the mantra for frugality which is savor the saver. Thank you.