

## BRIEF REPORT

# When Does Playing Hard to Get Increase Romantic Attraction?

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Folk wisdom suggests playing hard to get is an effective strategy in romantic attraction. However, prior research has yielded little support for this belief. This article seeks to reconcile these contrasting views by investigating how 2 hitherto unconsidered factors, (a) the asymmetry between wanting (motivational) and liking (affective) responses and (b) the degree of psychological commitment, can determine the efficacy of playing hard to get. We propose that person B playing hard to get with person A will simultaneously increase A's wanting but decrease A's liking of B. However, such a result will only occur if A is psychologically committed to pursuing further relations with B; otherwise, playing hard to get will decrease both wanting and liking. Two studies confirm these propositions. We discuss implications for interpersonal attraction and the interplay between emotion and motivation in determining preferences.

*Keywords:* hard to get, romantic attraction, commitment, motivational and affective evaluation, wanting and liking

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People often believe playing hard to get makes them more attractive to potential dating partners. As a rough indicator of the prevalence of this belief, a quick Google search on “playing hard to get” produces 288 million hits and thousands of websites advising how to properly execute this strategy. This time-worn approach has been documented as early as the fourth century B.C., when Socrates famously advised the renowned courtesan Theodote that to attract more “friends,” she must know when to be welcoming and when to withhold her affections until men are “hungry” with desire (Xenophon, 1923).

Despite the preponderance of intuition and history in its favor, the hard-to-get strategy is weakly, if at all, supported by academic

research (Eastwick, Finkel, Mochon, & Ariely, 2007; Finkel & Eastwick, 2009; Walster, Walster, Piliavin, & Schmidt, 1973). For instance, Walster and colleagues (1973) investigated what they called an “elusive” phenomenon and found that playing easy to get elicited more positive evaluations than playing hard to get, whereas playing hard to get generally seemed to decrease liking and romantic attraction.

The intuition of prior research downplaying the efficacy of the hard-to-get (vs. easy-to-get) strategy is founded upon the reciprocity principle in social relations: The golden rule of romantic attraction is that we like those who like us (Aronson & Worchel, 1966; Eastwick & Finkel, 2009; Gouldner, 1960; Luo & Zhang, 2009). However, several recent streams of research reveal numerous boundaries and moderators of reciprocity-related strategies such as playing easy to get and, in line with folk theory, suggest playing coy can be an effective strategy for eliciting positive interpersonal evaluations. For example, Norton, Frost, and Ariely (2007) observed a benefit of uncertainty in the context of dating—finding that people like prospective mates more when they know less about them. Tormala, Jia, and Norton (2012) found participants rated the potential of X to be more alluring than the actualization of X because conditions of uncertainty inherently elicit more interest, deeper information processing, and greater appeal. Whitchurch, Wilson, and Gilbert (2011) explicitly challenge the ubiquity of the reciprocity principle in romantic attraction by showing that women are more attracted to men whose affections are uncertain. This body of work suggests the uncertainty aroused by a hard-to-get response could induce greater engagement and motivation.

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We reconcile the two sets of contrasting findings by decomposing romantic evaluations into liking (affective appeal of reward targets) and wanting (motivational desire to pursue reward targets). Even though previous research (e.g., Litt, Khan, & Shiv, 2010) has discussed the possibility of a divergence in wanting and liking in interpersonal attraction, no studies have empirically tested this distinction. We show playing hard to get can differentially impact each of them. In the brain's reward circuitry, liking and wanting responses are governed by separate pathways (Berridge, Robinson, & Aldridge, 2009) and have independent and distinct effects on decision-making (Berridge, 1999; Brendl, Lisjak, & Dai, 2011; Dai, Brendl, & Ariely, 2010; Winkielman & Berridge, 2003). For example, the intense desire for addictive substances can occur with no corresponding increase in hedonic enjoyment (Robinson & Berridge, 1993). The same phenomenon can happen with non-addictive rewards: Laboratory rats can be chemically induced to want more glucose but end up displaying no corresponding increase in enjoyment upon consumption (Kelley & Berridge, 2002).

Furthermore, previous research has shown that the preferences for wanting versus liking can not only be de-coupled but can also *diverge* and be driven in opposite directions. For example, Litt, Khan, and Shiv (2010) showed that failure to win a prize increases wanting of it but decreases liking for it in subsequent tasks. Kim and Labroo (2011) demonstrated that highlighting incentive value (i.e., do I *want* this outcome?) versus inherent value (i.e., do I *like* this outcome?) has an opposite effect on outcome preference.

In the context of romantic attraction, these results suggest hard-versus easy-to-get strategies may elicit contrasting motivational versus affective responses. Playing hard to get (vs. easy to get) might be ineffective in eliciting positive affective responses but can be effective in eliciting positive motivational responses. Such a conceptualization of romantic attraction would allow us to reconcile extant divergent findings while also substantiating a time-honored folk theory.

Additionally, we propose that the motivational benefits of playing hard to get only arise when prior psychological commitment exists. Intuitively, we would expect playing hard to get to work best on someone who is already interested in or committed to pursuing further relations, but not on someone who has yet to develop any interest. Indeed, extant research shows task interest (Ford, 1992) and difficult goals (Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981) can enhance goal-related performance. Pre-commitment of intentions has also been shown to abet goal pursuit; for example, people who write down their intentions are more likely to complete a task than people who do not (Aarts, Dijksterhuis, & Midden, 1999). Similarly, Labroo and Kim (2009) found that when people have an active and committed goal in mind, difficulty of attainment increases the desirability of the goal, whereas when an active goal is absent, the reverse is true. Similarly, research on the sunk-cost fallacy shows that in a wide range of behavioral domains, one is more likely to continue an endeavor after investing time and effort into it (Arkes & Blumer, 1985; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Peck & Shu, 2009).

By considering the interplay and differential impact of wanting versus liking, we predict that playing hard to get in romantic attraction can enhance the desire to pursue (wanting) while simultaneously derogating the affective appraisal (liking) of the player (see Brendl et al., 2011, for a single manipulation that increased wanting while concurrently decreasing liking). Furthermore, we

propose the asymmetric effect of playing hard to get on wanting and liking will only occur when a prior psychological commitment exists. We conducted two studies involving both a mental simulation (Study 1) and a real speed-dating experience (Study 2) to examine this possibility.

Before discussing our findings in detail, we introduce recurring terminologies in this research that are based on established terminology in strategic interactions. We describe hard-to-get and easy-to-get approaches as strategies one can use in romantic attraction. We call the person who employs the hard-to-get strategy *the player* and call the person who is the target of this strategy (and thus evaluates the strategy) *the evaluator*. Furthermore, for the sake of clarity, we refer to the evaluator as "he" and the player as "she." Of course, this does not exclude the possibility that our conclusions apply to a broader range of romantic relationships and gender permutations.

## Study 1: Vignette

### Method

In this experiment, we manipulated hard to get versus easy to get and also psychological commitment in a mental simulation. We approached 101 single male participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 21.53$  years,  $SD = 1.62$ ) at a major university in Hong Kong to fill out a short survey. Participants read a description of a lunch experience with a potential dating partner (the player). We replicated the same basic paradigm as Walster et al. (1973): The player in the vignette was described as acting either relatively responsively or unresponsively to operationalize easy to get or hard to get, respectively. In the hard-to-get condition, participants read that "she responded very passively to the topics you initiated, never initiated any topics herself. Besides, she did not smile to you when you were sitting together." Conversely, in the easy-to-get condition, the player "responded very positively to the topics you initiated, initiated interesting topics from time to time, and she kept smiling at you all the time."

We asked those in the no-commitment condition to imagine the organizer of the dating event had randomly assigned the lunch partner to them, and those in the commitment condition imagined the lunch partner was someone on whom they had a crush. Based on this scenario, all participants then evaluated the potential dating partners on both motivational and affective dimensions. For affective evaluations, we asked the participants to report how positive or negative they felt about the player (1 = *very negative*, 9 = *very positive*). We asked two questions to tap motivational evaluations: (a) how motivated they were to build a romantic relationship with the player (1 = *not motivated at all*, 9 = *highly motivated*), and (b) if they got a chance to send a gift to her, how much they would be willing to spend on the gift (in HK\$). We Z-transformed and averaged the two motivational measures ( $r = .40$ ;  $p < .001$ ) to form an index of participants' motivational evaluation.

### Results

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) with commitment and player's strategy as between-subject variables and evaluation type (i.e., affective evaluation vs. motivational evaluation) as a repeated-measure variable yielded a three-way interaction,  $F(1, 97) =$

13.97,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .13$  (see Table 1; also see Table S1 in the online supplemental materials for raw results). More specifically, in terms of affective evaluation, an easy-to-get strategy is better than a hard-to-get strategy in both no-commitment ( $M_{\text{easy-to-get}} = 6.32$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ;  $M_{\text{hard-to-get}} = 1.87$ ,  $SD = .90$ ;  $t(47) = 15.38$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and commitment ( $M_{\text{easy-to-get}} = 7.72$ ,  $SD = .98$ ;  $M_{\text{hard-to-get}} = 2.78$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ;  $t(50) = 17.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ) conditions. The interaction was not significant,  $F(1, 97) = 1.49$ ,  $p = .23$ , *ns*. However, motivational evaluation showed a significant commitment by player's strategy interaction,  $F(1, 97) = 20.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .17$ . As expected, in the no-commitment condition, the evaluator's motivation to pursue a romantic relationship with the player was lower in the hard-to-get condition than in the easy-to-get condition,  $M_{\text{easy-to-get}} = -.03$ ,  $SD = .53$ ;  $M_{\text{hard-to-get}} = -.74$ ,  $SD = .33$ ;  $t(47) = 5.64$ ,  $p < .001$ . The reverse was true in the commitment condition,  $M_{\text{easy-to-get}} = .08$ ,  $SD = .59$ ;  $M_{\text{hard-to-get}} = .61$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ;  $t(50) = 2.18$ ,  $p = .034$ .

Correlation analyses yielded a significant positive relationship between the two types of evaluations ( $r = .60$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $n = 49$ ) in the no-commitment condition, whereas the correlation in the commitment condition was in the opposite direction but non-significant ( $r = -.21$ ,  $p = .13$ ,  $n = 52$ ). The two correlations were significantly different ( $Z = 4.41$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The correlation results provide further evidence that level of commitment plays a role in the distinction between affective and motivational evaluations.

In other words, despite liking the hard-to-get player less, the evaluator in the commitment condition still expressed relatively greater desire to pursue her. Furthermore, this effect manifested itself in a mere mental simulation of a dating scenario. Thus, divergent wanting and liking responses in romantic attraction seem to be intuitively accessible during evaluations. In Study 2, we show that wanting versus liking differences are not simply the result of lay beliefs and confirm our findings in a real dating context.

## Study 2: Speed Dating

This study employed a revised "speed-dating" paradigm (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Finkel & Eastwick, 2008) to validate our propositions beyond a mental simulation scenario. We propose that evaluators' affective evaluations should be more negative when the player implements a hard-to-get rather than easy-to-get strategy, regardless of the extent to which the evaluator has committed to the player. However, we predict that evaluators' motivational

evaluations toward the players who use a hard-to-get strategy are contingent on evaluators' level of commitment to the player. Specifically, when the evaluator is not committed to building further relations with the player, the hard-to-get strategy should lead to more negative motivational responses than the easy-to-get strategy, whereas when the evaluator is committed to building further relations with the player, the hard-to-get strategy should lead to more positive motivational responses.

## Method

We recruited 61 single male participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 21.15$  years,  $SD = 1.71$ ) at a major university in Hong Kong. A female undergraduate student served as the confederate for the speed dating. Several days before the speed date, participants received preparatory information about the study via e-mail. Participants in the no-commitment condition received the profile of the dating partner (the confederate) assigned to them. Participants in the commitment condition received the same profile and three bogus profiles and were asked to choose their dating partners via e-mail. The bogus profiles were less attractive such that all the participants in the commitment condition chose to meet the confederate. We adopted two more procedures to strengthen participants' sense of commitment. First, we asked them to articulate the reasons the chosen candidate stood out. Research has shown this kind of elaboration increases commitment (Petty, Wegener, & Fabrigar, 1997). Second, we encouraged them to send e-mails to the confederate in order to introduce themselves before the meeting day. Most participants (86.7%, 26 out of 30) in this condition followed the instructions and contacted the confederate by e-mail.

The study was conducted on a one-to-one basis. In each session, the participant first filled out a "pre-meeting" questionnaire to check participants' commitment to their dating partners and expectations of their performance (see the online supplemental materials). After completing the pre-meeting questionnaire, participants were escorted to the speed-dating room to have a five-minute conversation with the female confederate. Following the procedure outlined in Walster et al. (1973), the confederate received clear instructions and was trained to behave either in a responsive or unresponsive manner during her conversations with the male participants. For instance, in the easy-to-get condition, the confederate tried to find a topic of mutual interest, asked the participant questions from time to time to show her interest in him, and kept smiling during the conversation. In the hard-to-get condition, the confederate only passively responded to the participants' questions and did not ask any questions. She also displayed an unresponsive facial expression, and occasionally answered questions with responses such as "I don't care" and "I want to keep it as a secret right now."

Participants then finished an "after-meeting" questionnaire to assess participants' affective and motivational evaluations of their dating partner and the conversation. The affective measures were (a) how positive or negative they felt about their speed-dating partner (1 = *very negative*, 7 = *very positive*) and (b) how much they enjoyed their speed-dating experience (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Our first motivational measure was whether they wanted to talk to their meeting partner again (yes or no). If their answer was "yes," they were asked to report the strength of their motivation to talk to her again (1 = *very weak*, 7 = *very strong*).

Table 1  
*Means and Standard Deviations of Affective and Motivational Evaluations as a Function of Evaluator's Commitment and Player's Strategy in Study 1*

Player's strategy	Affective evaluation		Motivational evaluation	
	Random girl	Chosen girl	Random girl	Chosen girl
Hard to get				
<i>M</i>	1.87	2.78	-0.74	0.61
<i>SD</i>	0.90	1.09	0.33	1.06
Easy to get				
<i>M</i>	6.32	7.72	-0.03	0.08
<i>SD</i>	1.11	0.98	0.53	0.59

If their answer was “no,” we coded it as “0” (thus we only used answers to the second part of this question in our analysis). For our second motivational measure, we asked participants how motivated they would feel to behave carefully so they could—if given a chance to talk to the confederate again—make a good impression (1 = *not motivated at all*, 7 = *highly motivated*). We also included two standard measures from existing literature—their overall impression of their speed-dating partner (1 = *extremely unfavorable*, 7 = *extremely favorable*) and, if they went out with the girl, how well they would get along (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *get along extremely well*)—that we believe capture affective or combinations of affective and motivational aspects of evaluations. Finally, we asked participants about the perceived warmth of the confederate and provided demographic information.

## Results

**Manipulation check.** Participants in the commitment condition were indeed higher in commitment than those in the no-commitment condition (all  $ps < .025$ ). Also, participants in all conditions entered the meeting room with similar performance expectations (both  $ps > .64$ ; see the online supplemental materials). After-meeting measures also yielded results consistent with our expectations. Participants in the easy-to-get condition reported a greater perceived warmth than those in the hard-to-get condition ( $M_{easy-to-get} = 5.94$ ,  $SD = .68$ ;  $M_{hard-to-get} = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ;  $t(59) = 10.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**Main results.** First, consistent with our prior conclusion, the two standard measures yielded only a main effect of player’s strategy, such that the players in the easy-to-get condition received more positive evaluations than those in the hard-to-get condition (overall impression:  $M_{easy-to-get} = 5.19$ ,  $SD = .75$ ;  $M_{hard-to-get} = 4.63$ ,  $SD = .81$ ;  $F(1, 57) = 7.77$ ,  $p = .007$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .12$ ; expectation for getting along well:  $M_{easy-to-get} = 4.74$ ,  $SD = .86$ ;  $M_{hard-to-get} = 4.07$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ;  $F(1, 57) = 7.72$ ,  $p = .007$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .12$ ). Second, we averaged the two affective measures ( $r = .79$ ;  $p < .001$ ) to form an index of participants’ affective evaluations and Z-transformed and averaged the two motivational measures ( $r = .39$ ;  $p = .002$ ) to form an index of participants’ motivational evaluations. An ANOVA with commitment and player’s strategy as between-subject variables and evaluation type as a repeated-measure variable yielded a significant three-way interaction,  $F(1, 57) = 10.43$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .16$  (see Table 2; also see Table S2

in the online supplemental materials for raw results). The results remained virtually unchanged after we included the prior commitment ratings and subjective expectations (measured in pre-meeting questionnaires) as covariates in the same analyses, and the three-way interaction remained significant ( $F(1, 52) = 9.10$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .15$ ).

More specifically, in terms of affective evaluation, the commitment-by-strategy interaction was insignificant,  $F(1, 57) = 2.02$ ,  $p = .16$ , but the main effect of player’s strategy was significant. Easy-to-get players received more positive evaluations than hard-to-get players, irrespective of commitment level (no-commitment:  $M_{easy-to-get} = 5.53$ ,  $SD = .88$ ;  $M_{hard-to-get} = 3.40$ ,  $SD = .47$ ;  $t(29) = 8.29$ ,  $p < .001$ ; commitment:  $M_{easy-to-get} = 5.43$ ,  $SD = .65$ ;  $M_{hard-to-get} = 3.80$ ,  $SD = .65$ ;  $t(28) = 6.88$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These results concurred with the existing finding that a hard-to-get strategy is usually less effective than an easy-to-get strategy.

More germane to our research hypotheses, analysis of motivational evaluation showed a two-way interaction ( $F(1, 57) = 11.79$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .36$ ). As expected, when participants had no commitment toward their partners, the easy-to-get strategy evoked more positive motivation ( $M_{easy-to-get} = .53$ ,  $SD = .61$ ;  $M_{hard-to-get} = -.82$ ,  $SD = .81$ ;  $t(29) = 5.28$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, when participants had already committed to their speed-dating partner, the reverse was true ( $M_{easy-to-get} = -.08$ ,  $SD = .32$ ;  $M_{hard-to-get} = .33$ ,  $SD = .61$ ;  $t(28) = 2.30$ ,  $p = .03$ ), suggesting the hard-to-get strategy was more effective.

Similar to Study 1, correlation analyses yielded a significant positive relationship between the two types of evaluations ( $r = .78$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $n = 31$ ) in the no-commitment condition, whereas the same correlation in the commitment condition was in the opposite direction but non-significant ( $r = -.30$ ,  $p = .11$ ,  $n = 30$ ). The two correlations were significantly different ( $Z = 2.70$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Overall, the findings of our speed-dating study are consistent with our predictions. In line with previous research, playing hard to get (vs. easy to get) hurts affective (liking) response; however, when psychological commitment exists, playing hard to get can boost a motivational (wanting) response. Thus, consistent with lay intuition, playing hard to get can sometimes be effective in eliciting interest.

## General Discussion

Despite considerable study on the hard-to-get phenomenon, previous research has ignored two critical factors in examining this strategy in romantic attraction, namely, the dichotomy of wanting versus liking and the role of commitment. Across two studies, we show that playing hard to get can elicit stronger motivational responses from evaluators who are already psychologically committed to the player. When no psychological commitment exists, playing hard to get yields weaker motivational responses than playing easy to get. However, consistent with prior literature, playing easy to get always yields more positive affective evaluations of liking, regardless of the degree of prior psychological commitment.

Our findings contribute to several areas of psychology. From a practical perspective, our research identifies specific situations under which people should or should not use the hard-to-get strategy. Of theoretical significance, our findings reconcile the

Table 2  
Means and Standard Deviations of Motivational and Affective Evaluations as a Function of Evaluator’s Commitment and Player’s Strategy in Study 2

Player’s strategy	Affective evaluation		Motivational evaluation	
	No commitment	Commitment	No commitment	Commitment
Hard to get				
<i>M</i>	3.40	3.80	−0.82	0.33
<i>SD</i>	0.47	0.65	0.81	0.61
Easy to get				
<i>M</i>	5.53	5.43	0.53	−0.08
<i>SD</i>	0.88	0.65	0.61	0.32



contrasting viewpoints of traditional literature emphasizing the crucial role of reciprocity in interpersonal attraction (Chapdelaine, Kenny, & LaFontana, 1994; Eastwick & Finkel, 2009; Kenny & Nasby, 1980) and newer work highlighting the benefits of uncertainty in creating greater romantic interest (Norton et al., 2007; Tormala et al., 2012; Whitchurch et al., 2011).

Beyond the domain of romantic attraction, our results contribute to the understanding of the interplay between liking and wanting. In particular, we explore the tension between emotion and motivation systems in determining preferences and find that people may still choose an affectively disliked option if motivation is sufficient. This result gives rise to additional boundary-condition questions regarding the extent to which motivational signals can trump affective signals, and vice versa, and whether such divergence occurs in repeated interactions. For example, one might expect that a relationship instigated via a hard-to-get strategy may not last long if the affective reward (liking) is too low.

We also contribute to the reward-value literature by finding a situation in which the effort requirement (i.e., hard vs. easy to get) of a task or engagement may differentially impact wanting versus liking. We show that commitment to the player moderates the extent to which liking and wanting can be driven in opposite directions. Future research could potentially examine whether commitment is a necessary precondition for wanting versus liking differences to occur in other domains. For example, Litt et al. (2010) found that participants who were rejected a reward earlier showed stronger wanting but weaker liking for it in a subsequent task than those who were not rejected such a reward. From the perspective of our proposal, such results happened because participants were all in the commitment situations: They chose to participate in the study, and they exerted effort (playing games) for the reward. Related to this, the current research also provides deeper insight into the nature of motivation in goal pursuit, especially in the face of failure or negative feedback. Our findings also intuit a role of reward-acquisition difficulty in determining the desirability of certain rewards (Kim & Labroo, 2011). For example, our results predict that for tempting and desired rewards, substances, or individuals, the removal of easy reward acquisition (e.g., akin to playing hard to get) could perversely trigger greater desire.

Finally, our research furthers our understanding of the psychological principles of sunk costs. Contrary to the traditional romantic attraction literature suggesting that a hard-to-get strategy is ineffective, research on the sunk-cost fallacy finds people are motivated to pursue something when they have already expended more resources (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). Applying our conceptualization of the interplay of wanting versus liking at different levels of commitment would be of interest not only in the domain of romantic attraction, but also in any decision domains in which sunk costs or costly prior commitments exist.

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