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Research shows men think they can buy love
Brett Graff, www.thehomeeconomist.com

It's just after Valentine's Day, but all year round, Miami-based dating coach Dan Silverman meets men who spend too much money trying to win over women. Many of his love-seeking clients come for help after taking on huge car payments or heading to nightclubs where bottles of booze served tableside cost \$1,000, even though the same liquor on any store shelf sells for \$50.

"They all say, 'I thought this would bring me all the women in the world,'" Silverman says. "Sometimes they're in debt and have to sell the car because they can't afford the payments."

Men here — and by "here" we mean on Earth — are certainly materialistic when it comes to courtship. Some say more so than women. But men, according to new science, accelerate their spending and behave compulsively when they perceive the female population to be scarce.

Basically when women are hard to find, men pull out their wallets and become willing to pay — and even borrow — more money for almost anything, from cars to candy, televisions and dinners. It goes back to their evolutionary need to compete for mates. But experts today say this primal instinct could backfire both emotionally and financially, and is best — not to mention easily — left in history.

"I'm sure there are lots of women who would be attracted to someone who spends lavishly to gain power and status," says Leaf Van Boven, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at University of Colorado at Boulder who studies money and happiness. "But the fact is that people who have these motives are psychologically not healthy on average. They are less happy with their lives, more prone to depression, more prone to mental illness and they have poorer social relationships."

Basically the exact opposite effect of what that spending is supposed to buy, says Vladas Griskevicius, a professor of marketing and psychology at University of Minnesota.

Griskevicius performed a series of experiments; one directly related to Valentine's Day gifts. After providing a group of subjects with fake newspaper articles — half reporting a



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shortage of women in their city, the rest exposing the exact opposite — the men who'd read about female scarcity said later they'd spend \$260 more on engagement rings, \$6 more on romantic gifts and \$2 more on dinner entrées. Those men also reported decreased savings rates of 45 percent and almost doubled their willingness to borrow money.

“Men don't want to commit evolutionary suicide,” Griskevicius says. “From an evolutionary standpoint this is perfectly rational. Our minds are attuned to doing things that attract mates.”

In other studies, Griskevicius looked at 134 U.S. cities and found those where men outnumbered women also had the most credit cards and the highest debt levels. Separately, he discovered photos illustrating groups of people made up of mostly men could cause male viewers to act more impulsively, opting to receive small amounts of money that moment over larger sums later on.

“When the opposite sex becomes scarce the plentiful sex becomes more competitive and invests more in courtship. If a man wants a television and women seem scarce he'll buy a flashier television,” Griskevicius says. “These are subconscious things.”

It's because they're pre-wired to hunt and gather, says Dr. Tomas Chamorro, a professor of business psychology at University College London. So while women are more materialistic consumers, men take first place as status accumulators. “Not least because it elevates their status with women,” Chamorro says.

Problem is, we also unintentionally think negatively about people focused on status and power, says money and happiness expert Van Boven. Rather, people who pursue genuine interests — not praise from others — create for themselves positive physiological circumstances.

“Using status items to attract women may attract women who are interested in status,” Van Boven says. “Without an interpersonal connection, the next person with more items gets the same woman.”

Finding a more permanent mate, he says, requires asking yourself a simple question as you go through life, making decisions: What kind of person do I want to be?

“That helps you retrain your mind to focus on values that are deeper and more fundamental,” Van Boven says. “It's hard to imagine being in your final days and looking back, wanting to have more stuff. People want to be valuable, and do good in the world. It's just that we get distracted from those desires.”

*This is a monthly column by Miamian **Brett Graff**, a former U.S. government economist who writes about how economic forces are affecting real people.*

