

Risk Perceptions and Safer-Sex Intentions: Does a Partner's Physical Attractiveness Undermine the Use of Risk-Relevant Information?

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An experimental study investigated the combined effects of participant's gender and an opposite-sex target's sexual history (SH) and physical attractiveness (PA) on the perceived desirability of that target, participant's willingness to exchange personal information, intention to have sex, perceived riskiness, and intentions to engage in safer-sex behaviors should intercourse occur with the target. A total of 280 college students (140 men, 140 women) completed self-administered questionnaires immediately after viewing the target's photograph and biographic information. Results indicated that participants, especially men, overrelied on irrelevant partner characteristics such as PA and underused the more relevant SH information in making judgments about risk and probable future behavior with the target. Supplementary path analyses highlighted the role of desirability of the target as a proximal cause of both lower risk perceptions and weakened intentions to take precautionary actions. The need to more fully address motivational factors in future research and prevention efforts is discussed.

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