

# In the Name of Love: Can Nonverbal Communication Serve as a Predictor of Acceptance and Rejection of Potential Partners?

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## Abstract

This research aims to investigate the role of nonverbal behaviour in the prediction of accepting or rejecting potential partners. A Dutch TV-show is analysed by means of two studies. First, a perception test using a questionnaire is conducted showing 40 clips of two conditions: accepting and rejecting farmers. Secondly the clips are analysed based on four facial cues: eyebrow raising, smiling, nodding and headshaking. The results indicate no significance in the prediction of spouse choice. Additionally, the existence of the mentioned facial cues appeared not significant between the accepting and rejecting of a potential partner. The results are discussed and implications for future research are given.

**Keywords:** nonverbal communication; spouse choice; romance; facial cues; accept; reject; predicting behaviour.

## Introduction

“The most important thing in communication is hearing what is not being said” (Peter F. Drucker). For many years, researchers agree that nonverbal communication plays an important role in the process of sending and receiving messages, because it conveys important information that goes beyond words (e.g. Thompson & Campling, 1996)

To dive deeper into the field of nonverbal communication, this research focuses on nonverbal communication in spouse choices. This choice is made because nonverbal communication is found to be an important factor in conveying messages and it is shown to reveal people’s emotions (e.g. Bousmalis, Mehu & Pantic, 2009) and as love is based on emotions rather than rationality, it is reasonable to say that nonverbal communication can be an important predictor for love. Can someone predict if a farmer will accept or reject another person by looking at the farmer’s nonverbal communication? Therefore, the following research question is investigated:

*To what extent does nonverbal communication serve as a predictor of partner choice?*

To investigate this topic, the famous Dutch TV-show *Boer zoekt Vrouw* is analysed. In this programme a group of farmers is looking for their true love. Each farmer is accompanied by a group of candidates, who are competing in order to become the farmer’s future partner. During the programme, the farmers have to face multiple decision moments where they are obliged to either reject or accept a potential partner, which finally results in the one candidate who will become the farmer’s spouse. In the current research, the main focus is placed on these decision moments, with specific attention to the nonverbal

communication that is shown a few seconds before accepting or rejecting the (potential) partner.

From a scientific perspective, this research will contribute to existing knowledge about the interpretation of nonverbal behaviour. The results of this study could be interesting for specifically predicting spouse choices based on nonverbal communication. Due to time and space restrictions, this study only takes facial nonverbal cues into account. Therefore this research provides knowledge about several facial cues and based on this information implications for future research can be made.

## Nonverbal communication

“In addition to the words we speak, we give very powerful messages through nonverbal communication. Our body language adds an extra layer of communication, an additional set of signals above and beyond the verbal messages given.” (Thompson & Campling, 1996, p. 93). Nonverbal communication is not just a code, it is a form of language that needs to be interpreted carefully (Thompson & Campling, 1996).

Generally, it is believed that nonverbal behaviour can reveal a speaker’s emotion. According to Bousmalis et al. (2009) a lot of different facets of social relations, such as agreement or disagreement, flirting and politeness, are often expressed verbally. However, the nonverbal behavioural cues that occur during these expressions play a crucial role in their interpretation (Bousmalis et al, 2009). For example, if one person loves another, he or she can obviously just say it in words, but his or her nonverbal communication can additionally give the other person indications for predicting the feelings one experiences. One particular kind of nonverbal cues that can be used for expressing love are facial cues.

## Facial cues

The focus of this study lies on visual nonverbal cues that can be found in facial expressions. Facial expressions are aspects both of an emotional response and of social communication (Darwin, 1965; Fridlund, 1994; Russell & Fernandez-Dols, 1997). More specifically, people tend to recognize facial expressions and are able to segment these facial expressions into “emotion categories” (Cottrell et al., 2001; Cottrell, Padgett, & Adolphs, 1998; Padgett & Cottrell, 1998). Therefore, in spouse choices the nonverbal cues that are shown in the face of the one who is making the decision, can possibly reveal the choice before it is actually said out loud. In other words, as facial expressions are aspects of social communication, people should know what

the farmers are trying to communicate. This theory leads to the first hypothesis of this research:

H1: By watching a farmer who is going to reveal his acceptance or rejection of a potential partner, observers are able to predict this accepting or rejecting decision before it is verbally communicated.

Secondly, an interest lies in finding out what nonverbal communication contributes to the prediction of a farmer accepting or rejecting a potential partner. In order to find this nonverbal behaviour, this research focuses on four facial cues: *eyebrow raise*, *smiling*, *nodding* and *headshaking*, which are all briefly discussed below.

Firstly, *eyebrow raise* will be taken into account. Eyebrows are important for conveying emotions (Ekman, 1979). For instance, if someone is showing sadness, then often internal corners of eyebrows are raised and joined (Ekman & Friesen, 2003). This is likely to be the case if someone is rejecting another person. Bousmalis et al. (2009) performed a study about the nonverbal cues that could be present during behavioural displays of agreement and disagreement and they listed a number of tools that could be useful in detecting them. For instance, they found that eyebrow raise in combination with other relevant cues can be recognized when agreement is expressed and, as agreement is closely related to accepting, eyebrow raise can thus probably be an important predictor for accepting a partner.

Secondly, the cue *smiling* will be analysed. A smile is most commonly an expression of happiness, and the amount of happiness can be recognized by for instance the broadness of the smile. Among others, if the corners of the lips are raised than someone is showing happiness, the higher the corners are raised, the happier someone is (Ekman & Friesen, 2003). In contrast, when someone is sad, the corners of the mouth are reduced (Ekman & Friesen, 2003). When someone chooses a (potential) partner, happiness is one of the emotions that he or she will probably feel. As a smile is one of the most obvious cues for happiness, this will most likely be seen in the face of someone before accepting a partner of choice. On the other hand, if a farmer is unhappy because he is disappointing a woman by rejecting her, then the farmer is not expected to smile.

Finally, *nodding* and *headshaking* will be taken into account. Bousmalis et al. (2009) found that nodding is a common cue that predicts agreement and in the same line Stivers (2008) found that nodding is a sign of confirming agreement. In contrast, headshaking appears to be a frequently used cue for disagreement as a headshake can refer to the refusal or reluctance to believe what someone is saying (Bousmalis et al., 2009; Ekman, 1979). Since agreement and disagreement are closely related to accepting and rejecting, these cues can be probably used for predicting farmers' choices before they are verbally disclosed.

In spouse choices, given the literature above, when someone is accepting the other as a potential partner, they are expected to show nodding and when someone is rejecting the other they probably show headshaking. Based on these theories and assumptions, the second hypothesis is formulated

H2: Eyebrow raise, smile, nodding and headshaking differ between accepting and rejecting conditions and, hence, are predictors of the acceptance or rejection of a potential partner.

## Stimuli Collection

### Selection Criteria and Procedure

In order to conduct a research into the prediction of spouse choices, a set of 40 clips were selected. To avoid any bias in the clips, the choice is made to select twenty farmers and gather both an accepting and a rejecting condition of those farmers. During the selection process only male stimuli are gathered, considering only a few women have entered the television program as a farmer.

More specifically, the selection process included two important criteria. First, in the accepting condition a distinction is made between accepting a spouse in the beginning of the series (episodes three or four) or at the end of the series (episodes nine to eleven). This was, however, not possible for the rejecting condition as it only happened once per season that a farmer specifically rejected a potential candidate. Secondly, a broad time frame was used to avoid people recognizing a whole season. Therefore, clips are collected from the season 2008-2009 to season 2015-2016. All these clips were gathered from both YouTube and the website of the broadcast NPO which hosts the program.

### Video Editing

After downloading the episodes that contained the right farmers, the videos were edited with the programs Adobe Premiere and VSDC free video editor. First of all, the scene in which the farmer made his decision is cut out. Secondly, the moment of pronouncing the actual decision is removed. Being left with the right time frame, the editor made sure that only the farmer is visible, by cutting out the host of the show and the candidates. Most of the time the people to cut out were shown in different shots, so the shots could be completely removed. If a person was visible next to the farmer, this was solved by adding a black box at the same position as the person that needed to be hidden (figure 1). Additionally, the sound was removed from the clips.

Finally, the selection consists of 40 clips of about ten seconds each (ranging from 3 to 20 seconds). To avoid any chance of cheating, the clips were named with numbers (1 to 40) in a random order. Lastly, they were uploaded to YouTube in order to be embedded in an online survey.



Figure 1: Example of a clip with an added black box

## Study 1: Perception test

### Participants

In total a number of 85 Dutch participants completed the survey, with a female-male ratio of 70/15 and an average age of 30 years old ( $SD = 13.68$ ). Most of the participants were scientifically educated (WO = 56.47%), higher educated (HBO = 17.65%) or intermediate educated (MBO = 11.76%). Additionally, 64.71% of the participants was at least familiar with the television program “Boer Zoekt Vrouw” and 12.94% indicated to always watch this TV-show.

As can be concluded, the group of participants does not represent the Dutch population well. This is due to the use of a convenience sample as a result of time constraints.

### Materials and Procedure

In order to answer the first research question, an online questionnaire has been conducted using the program *Qualtrics*. In this experiment the independent variables are the stimuli of both the accepting and rejecting condition and the dependent variable is the prediction behaviour of the participants: whether or not they can predict if the farmer in question will accept or reject a candidate. To test this, a within subject design is chosen. This means that each participant got to see and respond to both conditions of the stimuli, which were shown randomly to avoid a learning effect.

In order to participate to the research, participants were approached by the researchers through social media and e-mail. If participants agreed, they could follow a link that led them directly to the short introduction part in which the main goal of the study was mentioned. After the introduction, demographic information was asked and instructions were given for the perception test (see Appendix A for the full instruction text). After this instruction each participant was shown the 40 stimuli with after each movie the question whether they thought the farmer would accept or reject the candidate. At the end of the survey the participants were thanked for their participation.

## Results

With regard to the first research question, several statistical analyses are conducted. First, participants’ prediction behaviour was tested by comparing their amount of correct and incorrect answers. As there were 85 participants who all saw both clips of each farmer, the total amount of responses per farmer was 170 ( $85 \times 2$ ). Consequently, a paired sample t-tests was used to test if the distribution of these 170 responses on correct ( $M = 95.70$ ,  $SD = 26.26$ ) versus incorrect ( $M = 74.30$ ,  $SD = 26.26$ ) predictions of each farmer differed significantly from each other. It turned out that this was not the case ( $t(19) = 1.82$ ,  $p = .08$ )

Moreover, a paired sample t-test was conducted to test if the amount of participants who made right predictions differed between the accepting ( $M = 47.00$ ,  $SD = 23.49$ ) and rejecting ( $M = 48.70$ ,  $SD = 24.19$ ) condition. Again no significance difference was found ( $t(19) = 0.19$ ,  $p = .85$ ).

Finally, looking at the amount of participants who predicted the accepting condition right in the beginning of the series ( $M = 53.70$ ,  $SD = 22.98$ ) and in the end of the series ( $M = 40.30$ ,  $SD = 23.16$ ), no significant difference was found ( $t(9) = 1.28$ ,  $p = .23$ ).

### Outliers

Due to the unexpected results, some outliers in the data are analysed as well. It turned out the top three best predicted movies were better predicted than that the three worst predicted movies were predicted wrong (in total, the best predicted movies had 9 wrong predictions and the worst predicted movies had 25 good predictions). This corresponds with the finding that in total more movies were predicted right than wrong.

## Study 2: Content analysis

### Material and Procedure

In order to answer the second research question, a content analysis was conducted. In this content analysis, all 40 clips, which were shown in the survey, were analysed. Two researchers (evaluators) of this research independently judged 20 clips each. The evaluators watched the clips in the same edited versions (no sound, added black boxes) as the participants in the survey watched them. Moreover, the evaluators did not know which clips belonged to the accepting condition and which to the rejecting condition. Hence, the evaluators received the same information as provided to the participants. Therefore, the observations made by the evaluators can be used for interpreting the results of the survey experiment.

As previously mentioned, four nonverbal behaviours (cues) of the farmers were analysed: *eyebrow raise*, *smile*, *nodding*, and *headshaking*. Using the annotation software Elan (see Figure 2), evaluators watched the clips and judged if each nonverbal cue appeared in each clip and when a cue appeared, they rated three specific features of it, known as: *intensity*, *frequency* and *duration*.

*Intensity* refers to the strength with which a nonverbal cue was expressed in a clip. Intensity was rated on a 5-point scale, with 1 indicating a very low intensity (little eyebrow raise, smile, nod and headshake) and 5 a very high intensity (big eyebrow raise, smile, nod and headshake). For the statistical analyses, mean intensity scores were used. These scores were created by calculating the average intensity for each cue in each clip. *Frequency* refers to the amount of times a particular cue was expressed in a clip and *duration* refers to the amount of time (in milliseconds; ms) a cue was visible in a clip. When a specific cue was expressed more than one time in a clip, the durations of all these occurrences were added together. Consequently, in the clip presented in Figure 2, the nonverbal cue *Smile* has a mean intensity score of 1.67 (5/3), a frequency score of 3 and a duration score of approximately 3500 ms.

However, as the 40 clips differed a lot in duration time (3 to 20 seconds), using *duration percentages* of nonverbal cues in clips were probably more useful for comparing the duration of nonverbal cues between the accepting and rejecting conditions. Therefore, *percentages of duration* were also calculated. These percentages refer to the amount of time a farmer in a clip showed a specific nonverbal cue expressed in the percentage of the total duration of the particular clip.

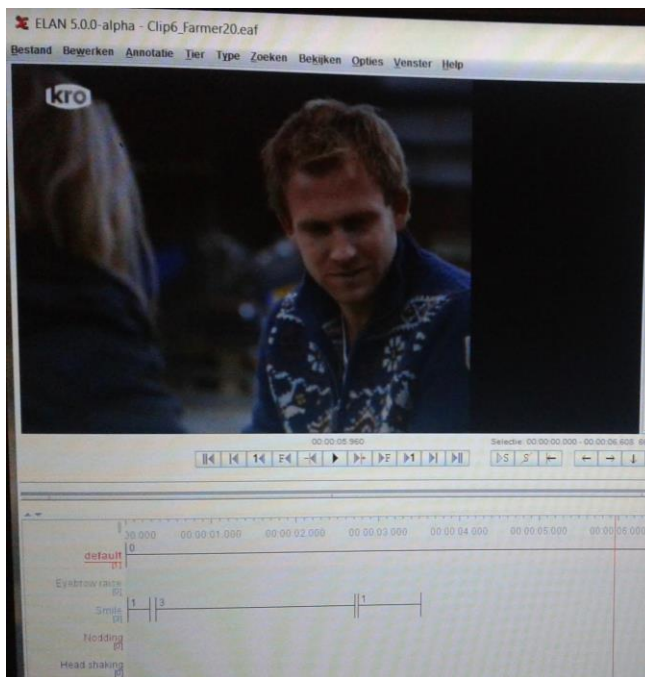


Figure 2: Example of a clip analysed with Elan

### Intercoder reliability

Before the actual analyses were performed, the two evaluators both analysed the same 10 clips which were randomly chosen out of the 40 clips. The analyses were

performed in the same way as described above and the data of these analyses were used for Cohen's kappa calculations (see Table 1). As *percentages of duration* were calculated with subjective data about *duration* judgements and objective information about total clip duration, no Kappa's were calculated for this feature.

Table 1: Calculated Kappa for each nonverbal cue judgement

	Eyebrow raise	Smile	Nodding	Head shaking
Intensity	-.02	.06	.40	1.00
Frequency	-.05	-.15	.38	.47
Duration	.02	.00	.17	.47

As can be seen in Table 1, the Kappa-values of the multiple judgements differed a lot, but most of them were very low. These low values indicated little agreement among the two evaluators. By comparing the analyses of both evaluators with each other, it turned out that the frequency ratings differed a lot. When a cue was shown with a long duration, one evaluator made just one annotation of this cue with an intensity score, while the other evaluator made multiple annotations of this cue using varying intensity scores (an example of this last judging style is shown in Figure 2). These differences in judging style did not only lead to different frequency judgements but also to different mean intensity scores. To reach more agreement, the evaluators decided to use the judging style with multiple annotations for the actual analyses, because this style did more accurately reveal the average intensity of the expressed nonverbal cues.

### Results

The results are based on the judgements of the two evaluators, who analysed 20 clips each. The independent variable was condition: *accept* versus *reject*. In total, 16 dependent variables were analysed: each nonverbal cue feature (*intensity*, *frequency*, *duration*, and *percentage of duration*) of each nonverbal cue (*eyebrow raise*, *smile*, *nodding*, and *headshaking*). Table 2 shows the mean scores and standard deviation for each dependent variable.

For each dependent variable a paired sample t-test was performed. This means that for each farmer, the judges of each of his nonverbal cues in the accepting and rejecting condition were compared with each other. The t-tests revealed that none of the nonverbal cues differed significantly between the accepting and rejecting condition (Eyebrow raise judgements:  $t(19) < 2.09, p > .05$ ; Smile judgements:  $t(19) < 1.55, p > .14$ ; Nodding judgements:  $t(19) < 1.47, p > .16$ ; Headshake judgements:  $t(19) < 1.02, p > .32$  )

Table 2: Means and standard deviations (between brackets) of each dependent variable (A = accept condition, R = reject condition)

	Eyebrow raise	Smile	Nodding	Headshaking
Intensity (min. 1, max. 5)	A: <i>M</i> = 1.05 (1.44) R: <i>M</i> = 0.54 (1.03)	A: <i>M</i> = 1.67 (0.72) R: <i>M</i> = 1.60 (0.78)	A: <i>M</i> = 1.02 (1.34) R: <i>M</i> = 0.70 (0.86)	A: <i>M</i> = 0.10 (0.45) R: <i>M</i> = 0.15 (0.49)
Frequency	A: <i>M</i> = 1.05 (1.64) R: <i>M</i> = 0.60 (1.31)	A: <i>M</i> = 1.55 (0.69) R: <i>M</i> = 1.90 (1.25)	A: <i>M</i> = 0.80 (1.01) R: <i>M</i> = 0.80 (1.01)	A: <i>M</i> = 0.10 (0.45) R: <i>M</i> = 0.15 (0.49)
Duration (in ms)	A: <i>M</i> = 917.55 (1611.79) R: <i>M</i> = 437.55 (918.47)	A: <i>M</i> = 2900.40 (2784.22) R: <i>M</i> = 4052.05 (3269.55)	A: <i>M</i> = 590.75 (759.37) R: <i>M</i> = 517.00 (706.51)	A: <i>M</i> = 77.25 (345.47) R: <i>M</i> = 117.50 (426.19)
Percentage duration	A: <i>M</i> = 11.45 (14.62) R: <i>M</i> = 4.77 (9.18)	A: <i>M</i> = 54.92 (34.66) R: <i>M</i> = 52.72 (34.61)	A: <i>M</i> = 13.07 (18.12) R: <i>M</i> = 6.11 (8.38)	A: <i>M</i> = 0.38 (1.71) R: <i>M</i> = 2.19 (7.64)

However, three eyebrow raise judgements were almost significant (Frequency:  $t(19) = 1.92, p = .07$ ; Duration:  $t(19) = 1.91, p = .07$ ; Percentage of duration:  $t(19) = 2.09, p = .05$ ). The data of these three judgements is shown in Figure 3.

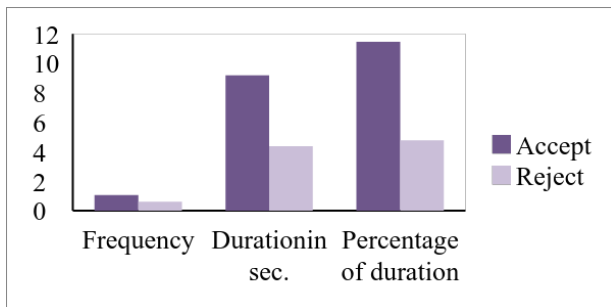


Figure 3: Mean eyebrow raise frequencies, durations (in sec.) and percentages of durations in accept and reject conditions

## Discussion

The present studies investigated nonverbal cues, with the aim of finding out if observers can predict acceptance and rejection of potential partners and whether specific nonverbal cues differ between accept and reject conditions. In contrast with the expectations, the results do not show support for the ability to predict whether the farmer is going to reject or accept a candidate. There was also no support for the expectation that facial cues play a role in predicting a rejection or acceptance. Both hypotheses are therefore rejected.

The possible outcomes were reflected in two hypotheses. The first hypothesis claimed that observers

can predict whether a farmer is going to accept or reject a potential partner. The results of study 1 showed that participants were not able to this.

A possible explanation for this finding is that visual cues are hard to distinguish and they can differ among individuals. For instance, a smile can indicate that someone is happy, but sometimes it can also be a sign of shyness or cynicism (Lewis, 2012). Additionally, eyebrow raise can indicate multiple emotions: for instance, astonishment and concern (Ekman & Friesen, 2003). This makes it hard for observers to judge people their emotional state by just watching short videos of them.

Another possible explanation for the finding that participants could not predict accept and reject decisions correctly, is that they were not familiar with the farmers their 'normal behaviour'. Hence, participants could not compare the two conditions (accept and reject) with farmers their general 'baseline' behaviour. For instance, when participants had known that a particular farmer smiles or nods often in general or just in specific cases (e.g. reporting positive or negative news) than participants might have evaluated the videos differently.

In the second hypothesis it was predicted that specific facial cues (eyebrow raise, smile, nodding, and headshaking) play a significant role in predicting acceptance and rejection. This hypothesis is also rejected, as the results showed that these facial cues did not differ significantly between the accepting and rejecting condition. Consequently, these cues were probably not useful in the prediction of acceptance and rejection of possible partners.

## Limitations and future research

Following from the results, several implications are made for future research. First, it is recommended to use a neutral condition when performing a similar study. During the current research, participants got to see the farmers only in an accepting and rejecting situation. Perhaps if the participants saw the farmers first in a natural condition (as a baseline) they could use this information to judge the nonverbal communication of the farmers more correctly.

Another possibility is to show the acceptance and the rejection video of the same farmer next to each other and let participants choose in which of the two video's the farmer rejects or accepts someone. In this research the videos were showed separated and in a random order to prevent participants from basing their decision on what they had already seen. However this may have been too difficult, especially without seeing the farmers in their natural condition as mentioned above.

Another recommendation for future research would be a research with more participants. One analysis in study 1 showed an almost significant p-value ( $p = .08$ ). This finding indicates a trend. Moreover, in total more movies were predicted right than wrong. Consequently, these findings of study 1 supports the idea that observers, in general, can predict spouse choices quite well. Further research with more participants is necessary.

Thirdly, a possibility for future research is to look at other facial cues. During the coding of the videos a lot more cues were noticed such as lip biting, sighing, leaning forward or backwards, frowning etc. These cues could have been noticed by the participants in the survey, however because of time constraints it was not possible to take these cues into account during the coding of the videos. If there is more time to take these cues into account, it will give a broader insight of the visual cues that can be displayed during spouse choices.

Lastly, in study 2 three dependent variables (cues) showed almost significant results: frequency, duration and percent of duration on eyebrow raise. These almost significant p-values could indicate a trend. With more data it is possible that eyebrow raise shows significance. In other words, eyebrow raise could differ between rejection and acceptance condition. To test this hypothesis future research with more data is necessary, which means more clips need to be analysed.

## Conclusion

In the present study is investigated if observers are able to predict if a farmer is going to reject or accept a potential partner. Two studies were conducted. First, a perception test using a questionnaire with 40 clips of two conditions: accepting and rejecting potential partners by farmers. Secondly these clips are analysed on four facial cues: eyebrow raising, smiling, nodding and headshaking. This research showed no support for these hypotheses. Additionally, the expectations included the

difference in nonverbal behaviour by means of eyebrow raising, smiling, nodding and headshaking. The content analysis has shown that these nonverbal cues did differ between the two conditions. Also, the facial cues did not play a role in the predicting the condition. Some values were almost significant.

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## APPENDIX A: Survey instruction

Beste deelnemer,

Bedankt dat u deel wilt nemen aan dit onderzoek. In dit onderzoek gaat u de nonverbale communicatie van mensen beoordelen wanneer zij iemand afwijzen of juist accepteren. U zult korte filmfragmenten uit het televisieprogramma Boer zoekt Vrouw te zien krijgen. Aangezien u filmpjes gaat bekijken, is het handig als u deze enquête op een computer of laptop invult.

Dit onderzoek wordt uitgevoerd door vier masterstudenten Communicatie- en Informatiewetenschappen van Tilburg University. Het onderzoek wordt uitgevoerd voor het vak: Nonverbal Communication. Door deze enquête in te vullen, helpt u mee om de kennis over nonverbale communicatie te vergroten.

Het invullen van deze enquête zal ongeveer 10 minuten duren. U zult eerst een aantal algemene vragen over uzelf voorgelegd krijgen. Daarna volgen de filmpjes. Tot slot krijgt u een paar vragen over uw bekendheid met het televisieprogramma.

Al uw gegevens worden anoniem verwerkt. Alleen de studenten die dit onderzoek uitvoeren hebben toegang tot uw ingevulde gegevens en antwoorden.

Mocht u vragen of opmerkingen hebben over dit onderzoek, dan kunt u contact met ons opnemen via het volgende e-mailadres: [t.t.visser@tilburguniversity.edu](mailto:t.t.visser@tilburguniversity.edu)

Nogmaals bedankt voor uw medewerking.

Lisanne van den Eijnden

Toke van Telgen

Juliet van Viersen

Tessa Visser

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Hierna krijgt u 40 korte filmpjes te zien uit het Nederlandse televisieprogramma Boer zoekt Vrouw. In dit programma zijn een aantal boeren op zoek naar hun ware liefde. Tijdens het programma zijn er meerdere keuzemomenten waarop boeren kiezen welke (potentiële) partners mogen blijven en welke niet. Op deze manier komen de boeren steeds dichterbij hun uiteindelijke partner.

De filmpjes spelen zich af vlak voor het moment dat een boer zegt of iemand mag blijven of niet. Na ieder filmpje wordt u gevraagd om te voorspellen of de boer in het filmpje iemand gaat afwijzen, of dat hij iemand gaat kiezen als (potentiële) partner.

De lengte van de filmpjes varieert van 2 tot 20 seconden. In de filmpjes zijn soms zwarte blokken te zien. Dit is gedaan zodat alleen de boer in beeld is en u geen andere mensen ziet. De filmpjes bevatten geen geluid.

We verzoeken u ieder filmpje eenmaal te bekijken en daarna de vraag te beantwoorden.