
ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Pregnant Women's Preferences for Men's Faces Differ Significantly from Nonpregnant Women

Erika Limoncin, PsyD, PhD,*¹ Giacomo Ciocca, PsyD, PhD,*¹ Giovanni Luca Gravina, MD,*
Eleonora Carosa, MD, PhD,*¹ Daniele Mollaioli, PsyD,*¹ Alessandro Cellerino, PhD,[†]
Andrea Mennucci, MD,[†] Stefania Di Sante, MD,[‡] Andrea Lenzi, MD,[‡] and Emmanuele A. Jannini, MD*[§]

*School of Sexology, Department of Clinical, Applied and Biotechnological Sciences, University of L'Aquila, L'Aquila, Italy; [†]Laboratory of Biology, Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa, Pisa, Italy; [‡]Department of Experimental Medicine, Sapienza University of Rome, Rome, Italy; [§]Endocrinology, Andrology and Medical Sexology, Department of Systems Medicine, Tor Vergata University of Rome, Rome, Italy

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. There is evidence that women's preferences for facial characteristics in men's faces change according to menstrual phase and sexual hormones. Literature indicates that the pregnancy is characterized by a specific sexual hormonal pattern with respect to all other physiological conditions concerning the sexual hormone status during the reproductive age, configuring this physiological condition as an excellent surrogate to study how the sexual hormones may affect many of the aspects concerning the sexual behavior.

Aim. The aim of this study was to investigate pregnancy as a model of hormonal influence on women's facial preferences in short-term and long-term relationships and compare the choices of pregnant women with those of nonpregnant women.

Main Outcome Measures. Measurement of women's preferences for synthetic men's faces, morphed from hyper-masculine to hypomasculine shape.

Materials and Methods. Forty-six women in the third trimester of pregnancy, and 70 nonpregnant women took part in the study. All women were shown a composite male face. The sexual dimorphism of the images was enhanced or reduced in a continuous fashion using an open-source morphing program that produced a sequence of 21 pictures of the same face warped from a feminized to a masculinized shape.

Results. Pregnant women's choices differed significantly from those of nonpregnant women. In fact, in the context of both a hypothetical short- ($M = -0.4 \pm 0.11$) and long-term relationship ($M = -0.4 \pm 0.07$) pregnant women showed a clear preference for a less masculine man's face than the other group (short-term: $M = 0.15 \pm 0.13$; long-term: $M = -0.06 \pm 0.15$; $P < 0.0001$).

Conclusions. Women in the third trimester of pregnancy clearly prefer more feminine men's faces, distancing themselves from the choices of women in other physiological conditions concerning the sexual hormonal status during the reproductive age. However, other psychosocial variables may explain this interesting finding. **Limoncin E, Ciocca G, Gravina GL, Carosa E, Mollaioli D, Cellerino A, Mennucci A, Di Sante S, Lenzi A, and Jannini EA. Pregnant women's preferences for men's faces differ significantly from nonpregnant women. J Sex Med 2015;12:1142–1151.**

Key Words. Pregnant Women; Dimorphism; Attractiveness; Hormones

¹Equal contribution.

Introduction

The human face has a central role in social life, as an important influence on judgments of the physical attractiveness of potential partners [1]. Studies of responses to human facial sexual dimorphism have yielded intriguing insights into how facial masculinity or femininity affects perceptions of other traits such as attractiveness or trustworthiness. Manipulations of sexually dimorphic facial traits in computerized faces have been used to study how facial shape influences judgments [2–5]. The most important finding was that there are correlations between facial sexual dimorphisms and ratings of attractiveness [6] and that such judgments appear to have an evolutionary basis. Men and women appear to employ somewhat different mating tactics and are attracted by different mate qualities [7]. Cross-cultural studies have shown that men give more importance to physical traits, such as the hip–waist ratio, which is associated with the female reproductive potential [8], whereas women place more value on status and positive psychological attributes [9,10]. These sexual differences, which have been passed down the generations, have been attributed to the differential parental investment of males and females [3,10–12].

A cost–benefit approach to how evaluation of the attractiveness of men’s faces is related to sexual dimorphism has also been considered [13]. It has been suggested that women consider a set of direct and indirect benefits during the evaluation of male mate attractiveness. Indirect benefits might include heritable immunity to infectious disease, whereas direct benefits are those that directly influence the life chances of offspring, such as social and material support, or reduced risk of disease [14,15].

Biological or hormonal drive is an important factor in women’s judgments of male facial features and varies according to hormonal state. Many studies have shown that evaluations of the attractiveness of men’s faces vary with menstrual phase and use of contraceptive pills [14,16–19].

There is evidence that women’s evaluation of what constitutes an attractive man’s face shifts across the menstrual cycle, more specifically it has been demonstrated that during the ovulatory phase, women tend to prefer a more masculine face [15,20]. It has been suggested that this preference depends on the potential for conception

and is designed to ensure that in the event of pregnancy the offspring would benefit from good paternal genes for immunocompetence [21], as averageness, symmetry, sexual dimorphism [22,23], the voice, and the height [24]. In other phases of the menstrual cycle during which the woman is normally infertile, such as the luteal phase, women tend to choose more feminine men’s faces, in order to select partners on the basis of characteristics that are potentially useful for the offspring care, such as cooperation and protectiveness. Although more masculine men’s faces are interpreted as a guarantee of “good” genes, they might also signal negative attributes; it is known that men with more masculine faces tend to make low investments in stable relationships, owing, in some cases, to a tendency to impregnate as many women as possible.

If it is true that variations in hormonal levels influence women’s judgments of what constitutes an attractive male face [25], women’s preferences should change in pregnancy. It has in fact been demonstrated that pregnancy shifts women’s preferences toward a less masculine face, finding which is consistent with the hypothesis that the mate preferences of pregnant women are not influenced by a need to pass on good genes to potential offspring, because they are already pregnant.

Although there is some evidence on how specific physiological conditions influence women’s evaluations of men’s facial attractiveness, there is still no clear data on how pregnancy may affect choice of a potential partner for a short-term (casual) or long-term (stable) relationship.

Aims

Literature indicates that the third trimester of pregnancy is characterized by a specific sexual hormonal pattern with respect to all other physiological conditions concerning the sexual hormone status during the reproductive age. This specificity configures the third trimester of pregnancy as an excellent surrogate to study how the sexual hormones may affect many of the aspects concerning the sexual behavior [26–30].

So, the aim of the study was to investigate how the pregnancy in the third trimester may bear the facial shape preference with respect to nonpregnant women, with particular emphasis on the relationship context: casual (short term) versus stable (long term).

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