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Women's physical attractiveness and short-term mating strategies

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ABSTRACT

The current study examined the relationship between women's physical attractiveness – as rated by themselves and a set of third-party raters – and their mating strategy and sexual experience. Male ($N = 105$) and female ($N = 113$) undergraduates rated the attractiveness of face and body photographs of 93 female undergraduates. Attractiveness ratings – particularly bodily attractiveness ratings – were significantly related to women's mating psychology and behavior. More attractive women reported more sexual experience and a less restricted sociosexual orientation. In addition, some traits better predicted women's perception of their overall attractiveness, and this pattern was further linked to mating strategy: more sociosexually unrestricted women showed a stronger relationship between bodily traits (i.e., body mass index) and overall attractiveness than less sociosexually unrestricted women. Discussion focuses on the findings that a woman's mating strategy is linked to both her self-perceived and objective measures of attractiveness, particularly bodily attractiveness.

1. Introduction

The ubiquity of the "what is beautiful is good" stereotype (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972) implies that, in addition to attractive women wanting it all (Buss & Shackelford, 2008), attractive women may in fact *get* it all (e.g., Benson, Karabenick, & Lerner, 1976; Luxen & Van de Vijver, 2006; Udry & Eckland, 1984). But what women want, particularly in the mating domain, is complex. No single goal or strategy is preferred by all women or by the same women at different points in time. Although women, on average, have a stronger preference for long-term mating relationships than men, much variability exists within women about the degree to which they pursue short-term and long-term mateships (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000; Greiling & Buss, 2000). The current study focused on one variable that was predicted to influence women's mating strategies – physical attractiveness.

Attractiveness is a key predictor of romantic interest and affiliation. Studies consistently document the importance of physical attractiveness in predicting romantic pairings (Asendorpf, Penke, & Back, 2011; Curran & Lippold, 1975; Luo & Zhang, 2009). And although physical attractiveness is important to both men and women, men across cultures prioritize beauty more in potential mates (Buss, 1989), as men place greater value on traits that reliably predicted youth, health, and fertility throughout human ancestral history (e.g., Sugiyama, 2005; Symons, 1979). Consequently, a woman's physical attractiveness is a key component of her overall mate value (Buss, 1994; Symons, 1979).

Women's faces and bodies simultaneously showcase traits correlated with youth, health, and fertility. Faces can reveal youth via round cheeks, large eyes, and narrow jaws (Cunningham, 1986), health via clear skin and facial symmetry (Rhodes, 2006; Symons, 1979), and fertility via estrogen-dependent features, such as full lips, small lower face, and a soft brow ridge (Cunningham, 1986; Rhodes, 2006). Likewise, bodies can reveal youth, health, and fertility through cues such as fluid movement patterns, a rapid gait, body mass index (BMI; Montepare & Zebrowitz-McArthur, 1988; Symons, 1979), and a low waist-to-hip ratio (WHR; Jasienska, Ziomkiewicz, Ellison, Lipson, & Thune, 2004; Singh, 1993; Zaadstra et al., 1993). WHR may even track fertility changes across the menstrual cycle (Kirchengast & Gartner, 2002) and is a key physical trait that can indicate pregnancy, a crucial predictor of a woman's immediate fertility status. Although there is dispute regarding the relative importance of WHR and BMI to a woman's physical attractiveness (Singh, 1994; Swami & Tovée, 2007), WHR may be especially relevant to judgments of fertility and BMI to judgments of health. Thus, both features appear to contribute in distinct ways to overall bodily attractiveness.

Although women's faces and bodies contain overlapping information related to youth, health, and fertility, they differ in their predictive power of each trait. For example, men prioritize bodily information relatively more when making decisions about short-term mating, a context in which immediate fertility is especially important, compared to long-term mating, a context in which cues

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to reproductive value are especially important (Confer, Perilloux, & Buss, 2010; Currie & Little, 2009; Lu & Chang, 2012). Although the face communicates much reproductively-relevant information, the body may more *effectively* communicate information about a woman's immediate fertility status. Thus, the relative richness of information provided by the face and body may differentially impact men's short-term and long-term mating decisions. If so, women's mating psychology may have co-evolved to take men's preferences into account when assessing their own attractiveness as a long-term or short-term mate.

Mating strategies range temporally from short-term (e.g., brief sexual encounters) to long-term (e.g., committed enduring romantic relationships) and can be mixed (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). Women tend toward a more long-term orientation than men (Buss & Schmitt, 1993) and maintain high standards for mate choice in both short-term and long-term mating contexts, whereas men show lower standards for mate choice in short-term contexts (Kenrick, Sadalla, Groth, & Trost, 1990). Within this overall pattern, however, there are individual differences and conditional adjustments, such as those based on opportunity and quality of available mates (Greiling & Buss, 2000). Women's decision-making mechanisms are predicted to incorporate information about their own attractiveness in estimates of expected mating interest from men, thereby influencing her pursuit of short-term and long-term mateships.

The current study explored the relationship between women's physical attractiveness and mating strategy. Historically, very beautiful women would have been successful at attracting mates for both short-term and long-term mating, but may have more efficiently increased their reproductive success by prioritizing long-term mating relationships with high quality mates (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Given the evidence that women's faces and bodies track slightly different sets of information about reproductive value and fertility, women's decision-making mechanisms may incorporate the relative levels of their facial and bodily attractiveness to conditionally bias behavior toward the mating strategy that was recurrently more effective (in terms of reproductive success) for that constellation of attractiveness cues.

We explored several questions: (1) Are women's facial, bodily, and overall attractiveness related to particular mating strategies? (2) Do women who perceive themselves as more physically attractive expect more sexual interest from men? (3) Do women with more attractive bodies report greater success in short-term mating? (4) Within women's bodily attractiveness, what is the relative importance of BMI and WHR to overall attractiveness and mating strategy?

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Two sets of undergraduates participated in this study: the women who served as targets (Phase 1) and the men and women who provided third-party ratings of the target women's physical attractiveness (Phase 2). Ninety-eight women originally served as targets; however, we removed participants who were 31 or older (3 *SD*s above the mean; $n = 3$), and non-heterosexual participants ($n = 2$). This left us with a final sample of 93 women (age $M = 19.27$, $SD = 1.41$). Their reported ethnicities are as follows: 46% Caucasian, 25% Hispanic, 16% East Asian, 7% Black, 3% South Asian, 1% Middle Eastern, and 2% from other ethnicities. Raters consisted of 115 women and 117 men. We excluded data from non-heterosexual individuals ($n = 14$), leaving a final sample of 113 women and 105 men (age $M = 18.68$, $SD = 2.10$). Their reported ethnicities were similar to the sample of target women: 50% Caucasian, 19% Hispanic, 18% East Asian, 5% Black, 5% South Asian, 2% Middle Eastern, and 1% from other ethnicities.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Phase 1

The web-based questionnaire for Phase 1 consisted of several components. First, questions elicited ratings of physical attractiveness on 1 (“Extremely unattractive”) to 10 (“Extremely attractive”) scales. The three items were: “How do you think your female peers would rate you on the following qualities?”, “How do you think your male peers would rate you on the following qualities?”, and “How do you rate yourself on the following qualities?” For each question, the women rated their facial, bodily, and overall attractiveness. The second component contained the Revised Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (SOI-R; Penke & Asendorpf, 2008) to assess mating strategy. Higher scores indicate more unrestricted sociosexual orientation (stronger proclivity toward short-term mating; $\alpha = .87$). The final component included the Sex and Commitment Contrast instrument (Haselton & Buss, 2000) in which participants rate 15 behaviors conducted by a hypothetical member of the opposite sex (e.g., “complimented your appearance”, “put his hand on your thigh”). Each behavior was rated twice: once for the likelihood that the hypothetical individual would be *sexually* interested in the participant given such behavior, and then for the likelihood that the hypothetical individual would be interested in a romantic *commitment* given such behavior. The rating scale ranged from −3 (“Extremely unlikely”) to 3 (“Extremely likely”). Scores for each set were averaged to create a sexual interest perception score ($\alpha = .91$) and a commitment interest perception score ($\alpha = 80$). Finally, participants estimated the number of partners within the past year with whom they engaged in kissing, sexual touching, oral sex, and vaginal intercourse as measures of recent sexual experience.

2.2.2. Phase 2

Photographs from Phase 1 (see Section 2.3.1 below) were standardized with an image editing program (Adobe Photoshop CS) for presentation on a 15 inch monitor (facial photos were 327 wide by 400 pixels high; body images – front and side – were presented as a single image at 583 pixels wide by 400 pixels high. Several photographs ($n = 15$; 8% of all photographs) were damaged on the camera and discarded. The entire instrument for rating these photographs consisted of 154 pages (77 women's faces, 77 women's bodies) presented in a web-based format. On each page, either the face or composite body photo was presented. The order of presentation was randomized prior to instrument creation; all participants completed the ratings in the same order. Participants rated each photograph on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 (“Very unattractive”) to 10 (“Very attractive”). They also indicated whether they knew the individual pictured (these constituted fewer than 1% of the ratings and were removed from analysis).

2.3. Procedure

2.3.1. Phase 1

Female participants entered the lab and provided informed consent. Then they completed the web-based questionnaire privately in cubicles. The experimenter and participant completed a second informed consent procedure for the photo and measurement portion of the experiment. Six participants opted out of this portion; six participants chose to participate in the measurements but not the photographs; and one completed the photographs and measurements except for weight. Consenting participants were instructed to change (in a private room) into clean gym clothes provided by the experimenters (black t-shirt, black gym shorts,