



## Male physical attractiveness in Britain and Malaysia: A cross-cultural study

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### Abstract

Three purported cues to perceived male physical attractiveness are the waist-to-chest ratio (WCR), body mass index (BMI) and the waist-to-hip ratio (WHR). This study examined the relative contribution of each cue in several socio-economically distinct populations. Ninety-five female participants from Britain and Malaysia were asked to rate a set of images of real men with known WCR, BMI and WHR. The results showed clear differences along a gradient of socio-economic development. In urban settings, WCR was the primary component of attractiveness ratings, with BMI playing a smaller role and WHR not reaching significance. In the rural setting, BMI was the primary predictor of attractiveness, with WCR playing a more minor role and WHR not reaching significance. In general, urban participants were more reliant on body shape and chose a relatively slim figure with an 'inverted triangle' shape; rural participants were more reliant on body weight and chose a heavier figure with a less triangular shape. These findings are discussed in terms of evolutionary psychological explanations of mate selection and sociological theories that emphasise the effect of resource scarcity on preferences for body shapes and sizes.

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### Introduction

Although a great deal of the research concerning physical attractiveness has focussed on the female body, researchers are increasingly paying attention to masculinity and the male body (e.g., Garrett, 1992; Stam, 1998). Much of this research has employed an evolutionary psychological perspective and considers

different traits to be an indicator of genetic variability. This explanation assumes that a reliable connection exists between body attractiveness and male quality, that male attractiveness is an indicator or some component of fitness such as health and vigour and that females detect and use this indicator for choosing a mate (Shackelford et al., 2000; Singh, 1995).

The most obvious case of sexually selected characters in humans concerns features such as beards and body shape that differ conspicuously between the sexes (Barber, 1995). Thus, it has been argued that

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men with dominance- and masculinity-related facial and body characteristics are considered most physically and sexually attractive. Testosterone and areas of the body indexing testosterone are suggested to play key roles, as dominant males have higher testosterone levels (Ehrenkantz, Bliss, & Sheard, 1974). It has also been suggested that aspects of male body build, particularly the upper torso, might be sexually selected. The shoulders of men, their upper body musculature and biceps are all more developed than in women, even when differences in stature are accounted for (Ross & Ward, 1982), and these characteristics are influenced by testosterone levels (Björntorp, 1987).

Using silhouettes as stimuli, a number of studies have shown that females tend to prefer a moderately developed male torso than extremely muscular physiques (Barber, 1995). However, most of these studies have not looked explicitly at male bodily physique, but have used line drawings to focus on the waist-to-hip ratio (WHR; the ratio of the width of the waist to the width of the hips). These studies report a preferred WHR of 0.90–0.95 (Furnham, Tan, & McManus, 1997; Henss, 1995; Lynch & Zellner, 1999; Singh, 1995). However, more recent research using photographic stimuli shows that while the WHR, body mass index (BMI) and waist-to-chest ratio (WCR) are all significant contributors to male attractiveness, WCR was the principal determinant and accounted for 56% of the variance (Maisey, Vale, Cornelissen, & Tovée, 1999; see also Fan, Dai, Liu, & Wu, 2005). By contrast, BMI accounted for only 12.7% of the variance and the WHR was not a significant predictor of attractiveness. Maisey et al. (1999) concluded that women's ratings of male attractiveness can be explained by simple physical characteristics that measure body shape (in particular the WCR). Women are said to prefer men whose torso has an 'inverted triangle' shape, that is, a narrow waist and a broad chest and shoulders, which is consistent with physical strength and muscle development in the upper body. This finding is comparable with other studies using line drawings which show that women prefer men with a 'V-shape' (wider shoulders than chest, which was again wider than the hips; Frederick & Haselton, 2003; Furnham & Radley, 1989; Lavrakas, 1975).

In opposition to evolutionary psychological explanations, however, it has been suggested that society has expectations for ideal male body shapes (Hesse-Biber, 1996; Murray, Touyz, & Beumont, 1996) and that males increasingly compare their bodies to idealised media and cultural images (Davis & Katzman, 1997; Heinberg, Thompson, & Stormer, 1995; McCreary & Sasse, 2000). Although gender differences emerge in attitudes toward cultural ideals of attractiveness, with women more motivated to conform to these ideals than men (Cash & Hicks, 1990; Muth & Cash, 1997), socio-cultural pressures concerning male body image seem to be on the increase. For example, one content analysis found a consistency in the V-shaped standard of male bodily attractiveness presented in US men's magazines between 1960 and 1992 (Petrie et al., 1996). In a more recent study, Leit, Pope, and Gray (2001) examined centrefold models in *Playgirl* from 1973 to 1997, and found that the cultural norm for the ideal male body has become increasingly muscular, especially in the 1990s.

If judgements of attractiveness are an innate preference, as evolutionary psychology argues, then it might be suggested that these preferences should be consistent across cultures. Although there is now a growing body of evidence examining body type preferences for the male body, the literature examining these preferences cross-culturally remains limited (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002). Using an undergraduate sample of Caucasian and Asian-American students, Mintz and Kashubeck (1999) found that males aspired for a large, muscular cultural ideal that does not differ between ethnic groups. However, while Mintz and Kashubeck (1999) explored satisfaction with specific body parts, they did not specifically investigate the interaction between ethnicity and gender on overall body figure preference. A more recent study suggests that Asian-American men are more invested in developing a large, muscular body (Barnett, Keel, & Conoscenti, 2001), but to date few studies have examined male physical attractiveness cross-nationally, using female participants.

This study therefore set out to explore judgements of male physical attractiveness among groups of female observers from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Previously, we reported that, because of unequal socio-economic transformation in recent decades, Malaysia furnishes a natural laboratory in

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