



## Original Article

# Aggressor or protector? Experiences and perceptions of violence predict preferences for masculinity



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## ABSTRACT

Women's preferences for masculine male partners have been explained in terms of heritable health. The evidence between masculinity and health, however, is controversial and therefore, alternative explanations for masculinity preferences reflecting income inequality and protection from violence have been proposed. This study thus aimed to test the effect of exposure to violence (i.e., experiences of robberies and perceptions of danger) on the individual masculinity preferences of women and men from the capital city of Colombia, Bogota, and surrounding small towns. One hundred and fifty three adult participants (mean age  $\pm$  S.D. =  $31.3 \pm 9.4$ ), all heterosexual, were surveyed in reference to indicators related to health (e.g., drinking water access, frequency of illnesses), access to media (e.g., television and internet access), education (e.g., graduating from high school, attending university) and exposure to violence (e.g., frequency of robberies/attacks, feelings of danger from violence). Participants made two alternatives, preference forced-choice for masculinized and feminized versions of both rural Salvadoran and European male faces. We found that men and women exposed to higher levels of violence preferred less masculine male faces, although this effect was only significant for women. Additionally, the effect of violence exposure was more relevant for the Salvadoran stimuli. Violence contributed significantly to explaining masculinity preferences after controlling for participant age, education, access to media, and health-related factors. These preferences may reflect women's strategy to avoid male violence demonstrating that exposure to violence matters in interpersonal attraction.

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## 1. Introduction

Sexually dimorphic bodily traits are presumed to have arisen from sexual selection favouring those phenotypic and genotypic characteristics that increase mating opportunities and offspring (Puts, Jones, & DeBruine, 2012). Sexual selection in males could have operated through female mate choice (Little, DeBruine, & Jones, 2011a; Puts et al., 2012) and/or through male-male competition (Puts, 2009; Tiddeman, Burt, & Perrett, 2001; Barber, 1995). A great deal of attention however has been put into studies of women's masculinity preferences reflecting mate choice at the individual and population level (Batres & Perrett, 2014; DeBruine, Jones, Little, Crawford, & Welling, 2011; Rantala et al., 2013; Rhodes, Chan, Zebrowitz, & Simmons, 2003; Thornhill & Gangestad, 2006), while less emphasis has been given to the effects of male-male competition at any level of study (de Batres, Re, & Perrett, 2015; Batres & Perrett, 2014, Snyder et al., 2011). Studies at the population level have utilized measures of health (e.g., mortality), violence

(e.g., homicide rate), and education (e.g., high-school attendance rates), which are aggregated indicators that summarize the state of a population as a whole. This level of measurement is usually based on environmental factors that are external to the individual, but that give a contextual framework for studies. At the individual level, measures considered are those that vary within a population and are experienced differently by each individual.

In support of mate choice being the selective pressure behind women's masculinity preferences, several studies have found a positive correlation between masculinity and different indicators of male mate value (i.e., traits associated with heritable health or those important for the acquisition of resources; Little et al., 2011a; Little, Jones, & DeBruine, 2011b). At the individual level, measures of actual health (i.e., childhood frequency of diarrhoea, health history, frequency and duration of respiratory diseases) correlated positively with masculinity preferences for male faces (de Barra, DeBruine, Jones, Mahmud, & Curtis, 2013) and with measures of facial masculinity (Rhodes et al., 2003; Thornhill & Gangestad, 2006). Positive correlations between health indicators and attractiveness to masculinity are not the rule though. Lie, Rhodes, and Simmons (2008) found that genetic aspects of health (i.e., diversity of the major histocompatibility complex genes of their participants) did not predict their facial masculinity. Fink, Neave, and Seydel

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(2007), on the other hand, found that men's strength positively correlated with facial ratings of dominance, masculinity, and attractiveness. These findings were explained in terms of strength being an honest signal of capacity to acquire resources and higher social status. Adding to Fink's results, Snyder et al. (2011) found that the more vulnerable women felt to crime, the more they preferred partner characteristics of aggressive-formidable men. These results suggest that formidable, masculine men may be effective protectors for women when they feel at risk.

At the population level, contexts that have been suggested to affect women's reproductive decisions include measures of environmental health (e.g., parasite load as potential virulence and number of parasites in the environment), development (e.g., measured as the frequency of internet use), income inequality (e.g., Gini coefficient), and access to education (e.g., Batres & Perrett, 2014; Brooks et al., 2011; DeBruine, Jones, Crawford, Welling, & Little, 2010a; DeBruine, Jones, Smith, & Little, 2010b; Kasser & Sharma, 1999). Evidence at this level, supporting female mate choice as the driver for masculinity preferences is found by DeBruine et al. (2010a, 2010b). Here women living in USA states and countries with a higher health index had lower preferences for masculine male faces than women living in places with a lower health index. Similarly, Penton-Voak, Jacobson, and Trivers (2004) attributed their findings of rural Jamaican women preferring more masculine looking males than British women, to the Jamaican environment having a greater pathogen load which could make signs of heritable health more important for women. Additionally, Kasser and Sharma (1999) show that when women have less access to education, they prefer characteristics associated with resource-acquisition in potential partners. Conversely, Scott et al. (2014) found that facial masculinity preferences for both men and women increased with lower levels of disease burden across 12 populations and that these preferences were predicted by level of urbanization, rather than presumed pathogen risk. Likewise, Snyder et al. (2011) found that women's mate preferences were not predicted by population violence (i.e., neighbourhood crime).

Inconsistencies in the results of studies considering mate choice as the driving force behind women's masculinity preferences (both at the population and individual level) may be due to an underestimation of the role of intra-sexual competition in men (Puts, 2009). Such inconsistencies could also be due to the disregard of the link between masculinity and behavioural traits undesirable to women. For example, more masculine men are more aggressive and are perceived as less trustworthy (Fink & Penton-Voak, 2002; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000; Jones et al., 2005; Little, Burt, Penton-Voak, & Perrett, 2001).

Women's masculinity preferences at the population and individual level have been found to be consistently influenced by male-male competition when taking into account risks associated to public violence (e.g., violence coming from strangers). At both levels of analysis, violence elicited higher masculinity preferences in women. Brooks et al. (2011) found that a country's income inequality index, an indicator of the level of violence, predicted masculinity preferences better than a country's health index. Since male masculinity is associated with dominance (Batres et al., 2015; Dijkstra & Buunk, 2001), it could be advantageous for women to choose a more masculine male in environments with a high level of male-male competition (Brooks et al., 2011; Puts, 2010). Ryder, Maltby, Rai, Jones, and Flowe (2016) found that at the individual level, women preferred more physically formidable and dominant partners when they felt more at risk of crime in public places. Complementing this finding, Little et al. (2011a) found that after priming women with images of male-male fights, they preferred more masculine male faces. The literature described above suggests masculine men may be better equipped with physical traits for antagonistic encounters with other men. This in turn could allow more masculine men to have higher statuses and hence be more attractive to women. Nevertheless, when women prefer a more masculine man, they may also put themselves at risk of increased antagonistic behaviours in the context of a romantic relationship. In fact, Li et al. (2014) found that

when women were primed with images of male-on-female aggression, women's masculinity preferences were disrupted and their feelings of disgust and anger increased. These findings may hint at different effects of domestic violence and/or violence outside the home on masculinity preferences.

Undesirable correlates to masculinity include preference for short-term, rather than long-term relationships, low trustworthiness and emotionality (Boothroyd, Jones, Burt, DeBruine, & Perrett, 2008; Boothroyd, Jones, Burt, & Perrett, 2007; Perrett et al., 1998; Rhodes, Simmons, & Peters, 2005). Additionally, Suguhara and Warner (2002) found that men's dominance, decision-making power, and possessiveness (all linked to masculinity) were associated with violent behaviours, including psychological aggression, physical assault, and injury in intimate relationships. Therefore, having a higher preference for more masculine, dominant, stronger men may be beneficial under certain circumstances and detrimental in others. Preferring a more masculine partner may be beneficial in environments where the source of violence is external and protection by a strong partner is an advantage. However, when the source of violence lies within the household or partnership, preferences may switch to less masculine partners (Li et al., 2014), who will be less aggressive and dangerous to women, particularly for those women who perceive themselves as vulnerable.

While the literature presented above suggests that women's masculinity preferences differ depending on context and individual perceptions, there is also evidence that men's judgments of male facial masculinity parallel women's judgments (Burriss & Little, 2006; Gangestad, Thornhill, & Garver, 2002; Haselton & Gangestad, 2006). For example, one study found that men were more jealous of masculine men (Dijkstra & Buunk, 2001). This finding suggests that men are aware of more masculine men being better able to secure short-term relationships than less masculine peers. Complementing this finding, Watkins et al. (2011) reported that men who have more feminine looking partners, perceived more masculine male faces as more dominant than men with masculine looking partners.

Intra-sexual competition would favour characteristics that enable exclusion of other mate-rivals by force or threat (Puts, 2009; Little, DeBruine, & Jones, 2013; Barber, 1995) or assist in the monopolization of resources that interest females (Puts, 2010; Little et al., 2011b). As men engage in fighting more than women do, it would be advantageous for men to possess the necessary skills to recognize the fighting ability of potential rivals and hence reduce the costs of a future antagonistic interaction and perhaps the risk of losing a romantic partner. Borrás-León, Cerda-Molina, Hernández-López, and Chavira-Ramírez (2014) found that men with low facial symmetry (linked to lower masculinity) rated symmetrical men as more attractive to women and as more likely to be potential rivals than less symmetrical men. This suggests that men with low facial symmetry may be at higher risks of cuckoldry than symmetrical men, and hence they would have to be more sensitive to cues of male quality.

In the current study, we examined the relationship between masculinity preferences for male faces and perceptions of danger from violence in both men and women. Previous research has demonstrated that facial and vocal masculinity and dominance are associated with greater strength and formidability (Fink et al., 2007; Wolff & Puts, 2010) and therefore, we predicted that masculinity preferences would be higher in environments where violent scenarios are more common and protection is needed. More specifically, individuals who experience frequent violence and perceive a greater level of threat from violence should display higher masculinity preferences. Women's preferences may reflect mate choice while men's preferences could reflect either awareness of what women prefer or a personal desire for alliances with more physically dominant same-sex peers from whom one could get protection. Indeed, in several contexts, men's and women's preferences for others' characteristics are congruent (Batres & Perrett, 2014; Perrett et al., 1998; Scott et al., 2014; Swami & Tovée, 2005).

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