



## Does waist-to-hip ratio (WHR) predict happiness? Belief about a person's essence matters

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### ABSTRACT

Physical attractiveness (PAT), despite its allure in everyday life, has been an inconsistent predictor of happiness in past studies. In this research, we find that a lay belief about the locus of a person's "essence" moderates the PAT and happiness link. Specifically, we measured how strongly one believes in the diagnostic value of the visible (e.g., status, appearance) over the invisible (e.g., mood, thoughts) aspects of a person in understanding who s/he is. As expected, the more one believed in the value of the visible features, the more central PAT was in the person's overall life, and appearance was compared more often with others (Study 1). More importantly, PAT and well-being correlated significantly only among those who strongly endorsed the visible selfhood belief (Study 2). Compared to past studies on PAT that relied heavily on self-reports, a highly objective measure of attractiveness (waist-to-hip ratio) was employed in this research. Our research uncovers a novel individual difference factor that helps to clarify why PAT predicts the happiness of some, but not of others. Whether one thinks a person's essence *can* be judged by one's "cover" seems to matter in the PAT and happiness link.

Beauty draws social attention. People pay attention to attractive people (Becker, 2017; Maner et al., 2003) and think they are more funny, nice, friendly, and competent than others (Hamermesh, 2011; Langlois et al., 2000). When interacting with an attractive partner, people actively initiate conversations, disclose more about themselves (Brundage, Derlega, & Cash, 1976; Garcia, Stinson, Ickes, Bissonnette, & Briggs, 1991), and behave in a more prosocial manner (Maestripieri, Henry, & Nickels, 2017). This general tendency to associate physical attractiveness (PAT) with positive qualities seems to be biologically ingrained, and often occur automatically (Aharon et al., 2001; Ishizu & Zeki, 2011).

Given the various advantages that follow PAT, one might think that beauty is a significant predictor of happiness. Yet, empirical findings do not offer compelling support for this common view. Although a positive link between PAT and mental health has been reported in several review papers (Feingold, 1992; Langlois et al., 2000), PAT has been most often measured through self-reports that are susceptible to various reporting biases. For instance, a person who thinks favorably of her appearance might also view her general life more positively than others. Thus, it is unclear how strong the association between PAT and happiness might be if the potential inflation created by self-report is controlled. Furthermore, different study methods yield different conclusions about PAT. In one study that analyzed 1100 twins (McGovern,

Neale, & Kendler, 1996), the authors concluded that PAT and mental health (depression) are essentially "independent." In contrast, in a more recent longitudinal study, a small but significant association was found between PAT and eudaimonic well-being (Gupta, Etcoff, & Jaeger, 2016).

One of the most systematically controlled studies on PAT and happiness was conducted by Diener, Wolsic, and Fujita (1995). Although a correlation of 0.13 between facial attractiveness and subjective well-being was obtained among college students, this correlation became insignificant ( $r = 0.03$ ; Study 3) when the effects of adornments (e.g., cosmetics, jewelry, clothing) were removed. This led the authors to speculate that the association between PAT and happiness might partly arise from the happy people's motivational (trying more to enhance beauty) and cognitive (self-bias) characteristics rather than from objective beauty per se. Thus, the empirical picture about PAT and happiness seems to change, depending on the method of PAT measurement, study design, or factors controlled for in a given study.

Despite the various advantages enjoyed by attractive people, why are the findings on PAT and happiness inconsistent? One possibility is that the overall association between the two might be clouded by individual difference factors, such as idiographic needs and interests (cf. Diener & Fujita, 1995; Tiefenbach & Kohlbacher, 2015). That is, how much people base their happiness on PAT might vary considerably from

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one person to another, and this “noisy” individual difference variance might attenuate the association between the two. If so, for whom is PAT more central? In this study, we introduce a novel lay belief that may offer insight to this individual difference question.

As social beings, humans instantly form impressions of others by synthesizing various cues about a particular person (e.g., Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007). Also, conversely, this framework is likely to be employed when imagining how the self might be appraised by others. Among the vast array of cues relevant for impression formation, some are relatively visible (e.g., clothes, social status, gestures), whereas others are relatively invisible (e.g., beliefs, emotion, aspirations) to the observers. However, individuals might differ in the degree to which they believe the highly visible (versus invisible) aspects of the self are able to reveal the true “essence” of a person.

We predicted that how important PAT is in overall life, and whether it shapes one's happiness would vary according to this personal belief. The more one believes in the diagnostic value of the visible aspects of a person, the more we think the person will incorporate PAT into her happiness judgment. To minimize possible confounds involved in self-reported PAT, we obtained a highly objective measure of PAT among females seldom used in past happiness research (waist-to-hip ratio; WHR) in this study.

## 1. WHR and women's happiness

Although the general aim of our research is to gain further understanding on the PAT and happiness link, we strategically focused on female samples for two reasons. First, according to evolutionary findings, PAT is a more central mate-quality for females than males (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Li, Balley, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002). A strong “beauty premium” exists among women (Maestripieri et al., 2017), which makes PAT a salient domain in women's self-evaluation. In fact, compared to men, PAT is associated more tightly with self-esteem and well-being (Barry, Pietrzak, & Petry, 2008; Feingold, 1992; Hamermesh & Abrevaya, 2013), and leads to more diverse behavioral and cognitive changes among females, especially during the ovulation period (Hill & Durante, 2009; Ko & Suh, 2018). These findings imply that PAT would be more relevant to the happiness of women than men.

Second, to minimize self-reporting biases, we sought to obtain a more “objective” index of attractiveness. One well-established index of physical attractiveness is waist-to-hip ratio (WHR), which is only relevant to women. Whereas body mass index indicates overall thinness of the body, WHR refers to body shape—the ratio of the circumference of the waist to that of the hip. Men find women with a WHR close to 0.70 most attractive (Jasińska, Ziolkiewicz, Ellison, Lipson, & Thune, 2004; Singh, 1993), a tendency recently confirmed by brain activation patterns (Del Zotto & Pegna, 2017). There is an evolutionary reason. WHR has been closely associated with women's fertility; women close to the 0.7 WHR range have optimal levels of estrogen and are less susceptible to major diseases, while women with higher WHR have significantly lower pregnancy rates (Singh, 1993; Singh & Luis, 1995; Wetsman & Marlowe, 1999).

Although WHR is an established marker of female attractiveness in evolutionary and biological research, to our knowledge, this research is one of the first to measure WHR and examine its association with happiness (c.f., self-reported WHR was examined by Plaut, Adams, & Anderson, 2009). Also, in previous work, the key interest was understanding how WHR affects men's perception of attractiveness (Hughes, Dispenza, & Gallup, 2004; Hughes, Harrison, & Gallup, 2009). How WHR influences the psychological experience of women themselves, on the other hand, are relatively less known. Our study will shed more light on this issue. We believe that WHR, in addition to being a mate choice criterion for men, plays a notable role in women's self-judgments, such as their overall well-being.

## 2. Belief about a person's essence

Compared to men, existing work suggests that women's happiness is more likely to be affected by PAT. Still, individual difference could exist. Among women, for whom does PAT become a particularly important? One novel possibility we propose is a personally held belief about what aspects of the person reveal who s/he really is (Park & Suh, 2005). Although the self consists of various elements (James, 1890), ranging from concrete possessions (“my car”) to metaphysical beliefs (“God's servant”), one major contrast is the degree to which these self-components are visible to others. For instance, the person's social status, wealth, or mannerisms might be relatively visible, whereas her mood, desires, and concerns are not. We think this lay belief—how much of a person's “essence” is believed to be revealed through the visible aspects of the self (termed hereafter as the “visible selfhood”)—will predict the weight one places on PAT in evaluating happiness.

Using various terms, social psychologists have pitted the inner/covert against the outer/overt aspects of the person (e.g., Anderson, 1984; Baumeister, 1986; Cheek, 1989). For instance, Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss (1975) introduced the classic concepts of private self-consciousness (tendency of focusing on the private, internal states of the self) and public self-consciousness (tendency of focusing on the public, external aspects of the self). The visible selfhood we examine in this research, although some conceptual overlaps exist, is distinct from past constructs. Instead of focusing on the chronic “direction” of self-awareness, the visible selfhood idea taps into a personal opinion about which “content” of the self (the more or less visible aspect) is most diagnostic of the person's essential nature.

This personal belief might be a key in predicting for whom PAT is important, and how much it matters in judgments of happiness. When making various self-evaluations, people selectively think about domains that are most meaningful or are key in defining themselves (e.g., Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Harter, 2015). A similar pattern occurs during self-judgments of happiness (Diener & Fujita, 1995; Oishi, Diener, Suh, & Lucas, 1999); when thinking about how happy they are, people place a premium on a specific domain they regard as important or meaningful. How central PAT is to a person's happiness, we believe, will be partly determined by the degree to which she endorses a highly visible selfhood.

In sum, we examined the role played by the visible selfhood in the relation between an objective index of PAT (WHR) and happiness in two studies. We expected that the visible selfhood would predict who places more personal importance to PAT (Study 1), and whether PAT becomes relevant to one's overall life satisfaction judgment (Study 2).

## 3. Study 1

In Study 1, we examined whether one's belief about the visible selfhood predicts how much PAT is prioritized in life. Given that physical appearance is one of the most salient and visible features of a person, those who strongly endorse the visible selfhood were expected to place more importance on, and think more often about their PAT in comparison to others. Two other self-aspects that were less visibly salient to others than PAT (personality, academic achievement) were measured for discriminant purposes. The visible selfhood was expected to predict how much psychological importance the person attached to PAT only.

### 3.1. Method and procedure

#### 3.1.1. Participants

One hundred and thirty female undergraduate students participated in this study for course credit. Although G\*Power software (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) indicated that at least 84 participants would be needed to have adequate power ( $1-\beta > 0.80$ ) to detect medium-sized effects, we included all participants who already signed

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