



Why is low waist-to-chest ratio attractive in males? The mediating roles of perceived dominance, fitness, and protection ability



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ABSTRACT

Past research suggests that a lower waist-to-chest ratio (WCR) in men (i.e., narrower waist and broader chest) is viewed as attractive by women. However, little work has directly examined why low WCRs are preferred. The current work merged insights from theory and past research to develop a model examining perceived dominance, fitness, and protection ability as mediators of the WCR-attractiveness relationship. These mediators and their link to both short-term (sexual) and long-term (relational) attractiveness were simultaneously tested by having 151 women rate one of 15 avatars, created from 3D body scans. Men with lower WCR were perceived as more physically dominant, physically fit, and better able to protect loved ones; these characteristics differentially mediated the effect of WCR on short-term, long-term, and general attractiveness ratings. Greater understanding of the judgments women form regarding WCR may yield insights into motivations by men to manipulate their body image.

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Introduction

Physical attractiveness is a primary determinant of the extent to which one is perceived as a desirable mate (Buss et al., 1990; Fletcher, Kerr, Li, & Valentine, 2014; Schwarz & Hassebrauck, 2012), and one of the most important aspects of male physical attractiveness is upper body “V-shapedness.” Several studies have shown that men with more V-shaped upper bodies are perceived as more attractive (Braun & Bryan, 2006; Brown, Price, Kang, Pound, Zhao, & Yu, 2008; Horvath, 1979; Maisey, Vale, Comelissen, & Tovee, 1999; Price, Pound, Dunn, Hopkins, & Kang, 2013; Swami et al., 2007; Swami & Tové, 2005). In many of these studies, V-shapedness is measured in terms of waist-to-chest ratio (WCR), with lower WCR being more attractive. The goal of this research is to address the issue of why females find males with low WCRs attractive. Understanding why low WCR males are seen as attractive is an important component of more broadly understanding why and under what conditions some men strive to attain a very low WCR, as well as the mental and physical health consequences of this goal.

Some previous research has explored this question. Approached primarily from an evolutionary perspective, fitness (e.g., Frederick & Haselton, 2007; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000) has been

conceptualized in a variety of ways and supported as one potential mediator of the link from WCR to attractiveness. However, a second potential mediator stemming from this same perspective, the ability to protect oneself and one’s family, has largely gone untested and is likely to be strongly related to WCR, as more muscular men are likely better able to fight off or intimidate a potential aggressor. A third potential mediator, dominance, has been conceptualized from both evolutionary (Braun & Bryan, 2006; Frederick & Haselton, 2007) and sociocultural (Bryan, Webster, & Mahaffey, 2011) perspectives, but has received mixed support as a mediator of the WCR-attractiveness link. We now turn to more fully discussing the three hypothesized mediators, and their evolutionary and sociocultural theoretical underpinnings.

Fitness, Protection Ability, and Evolutionary Perspectives

Much of the work that has been done on the perception of male physical attractiveness has taken an evolutionary approach. In general, evolutionary theory predicts that individuals should prefer mates with traits that indicate health, developmental stability, and physical fitness (in both sexes), fertility in women, and formidability (e.g., strength, fighting ability) in men (Grammer, Fink, Møller, & Thornhill, 2003; Roney, 2009; Sugiyama, 2005). In men, such traits may indicate physical ability to contribute high-quality parental investment, and/or possession of “good genes,” either of which could make a man a more adaptive choice as a reproductive partner

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(Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). A related reason why attractive men could make more promising mates is because they tend to attain high social status (Langlois, Kalakanis, Rubenstein, Larson, Hallam, & Smoot, 2000; Lukaszewski, 2013), which could further enhance their access to resources and ability to provide parental investment.

Because men with more muscular upper bodies and lower body fat have a lower WCR, lower WCR could plausibly indicate increased health, physical fitness, and formidability, and thus be a cue to good genes in males. Further, because of these physical advantages, low-WCR males may seem relatively able to acquire and retain resources and to provide physical protection. Finally, the fact that WCR is such an important aspect of male attractiveness, which is in turn associated positively with social status, may be an additional reason why low-WCR men would be perceived as being more able to provide status-linked (e.g., financial) resources.

From an evolutionary perspective, mate preferences are expected to vary according to whether a potential mate is being evaluated as a short-term or long-term relationship partner (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). If low WCR indicated both good genes and ability to provide parental investment, then it should be attractive to women in both short-term and long-term relationship contexts. This is true because women generally are expected to be more attracted to good genes traits in short-term partners, and to investment-related traits in long-term partners (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). However, the factors linking WCR to short-term attractiveness may be different than those linking WCR to long-term attractiveness. The good genes traits that relate especially positively to short-term attractiveness tend to be physical features, especially testosterone-linked traits such as relatively masculine body, face, and voice (Li & Kenrick, 2006; Little, Connely, Feinberg, Jones, & Roberts, 2011; Lucas, Koff, Grossmith, & Migliorini, 2011; Pawlowski & Jasienska, 2005; Provost, Kormos, Kosakoski, & Quinsey, 2006; Puts, 2010). With regard to bodily traits specifically, V-shaped upper body and features indicating muscularity, strength, and physical fitness have been found to be more important in short-term than in long-term contexts (Braun & Bryan, 2006; Li & Kenrick, 2006; Little et al., 2011; Lucas et al., 2011). In contrast, traits that are especially predictive of long-term attractiveness tend to relate more to parental investment, such as social status, access to resources, and the ability to provide protection (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Li, 2007; Li & Kenrick, 2006). In summary, perceptions of physical traits indicating masculinity and formidability (i.e., dominance) and fitness are hypothesized to mediate the link between WCR and short-term attractiveness, and traits indicating the ability to provide investment and protection are hypothesized to mediate the link between WCR and long-term attractiveness.

Fitness, Protection Ability, and Sociocultural Perspectives

Although sociocultural approaches often are framed in opposition to evolutionary perspectives, each sometimes reaches similar conclusions on the topics of attractiveness and mate selection, albeit for different reasons (Eagly & Wood, 1999, 2011; Wood & Eagly, 2002). Sociocultural theorists argue that observed sex differences are due to social and cultural pressures more than biological and evolutionary processes. Thus, instead of fitness and parental investment, emphasis is placed on cultural beliefs and practices such as traditional divisions of labor, gender-specific expectations and roles, gender equality, and the embedded nature of these differences in society (Finkel & Eastwick, 2009; Ridgeway & Diekema, 1992; Shelton, 1992; Tomaskovic-Devey, 1995).

In terms of physical attractiveness, sociocultural theorists largely emphasize its constructed nature. Indeed, research provides evidence that definitions of ideal male physical attractiveness, as

portrayed by the media, have changed in recent decades to become leaner and more muscular (i.e., broader chests and narrower waists), and thus more V-shaped, in both the United States and Japan (Darling-Wolf, 2004; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2009; Leit, Pope, & Gray, 2001; Luther, 2009; Mishkind, Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1986; Pope, Olivardia, Borowiecki, & Cohane, 2001; Spitzer, Henderson, & Zivian, 1999). Further, evidence supporting the notion that male body preferences are culturally driven has been obtained (e.g., Heron-Delaney, Quinn, Lee, Slater, & Pascalis, 2013). One study on WCR found that adults in more developed regions (i.e., Great Britain and urban Malaysia) prefer the V-shaped body to a greater extent than in a less developed region (i.e., rural Malaysia; Swami & Tovée, 2005).

Interestingly, one study finds that a cultural change toward a more muscular ideal has corresponded with an increased emphasis on men's role as husbands and fathers in Japan (Darling-Wolf, 2004). However, this same study reports that the man rated sexiest and the "man women most want to sleep with" in Japan was less desirable as a long-term mate and did not appear on the lists of men women wanted to marry. In the United States, though it is easy to find a list of the sexiest male celebrities (e.g., magazines like *People*), it is far more difficult to find a list of men women want to marry. *Forbes* publishes perhaps the only list of "most eligible bachelors" that does not contain the words "sexiest" or "hottest." These differences appear to indicate that different cultural norms exist for the characteristics women look for in a man, depending on whether they desire a short-term relationship (i.e., physical attractiveness) or a long-term relationship (i.e., financial assets/security), and these different norms are similar to the short-term/long-term preferences predicted by the evolutionary theory discussed above.

Dominance

As aforementioned, as it relates to body shape and attractiveness, dominance has been previously examined from both evolutionary and sociocultural theoretical perspectives, although results have been inconsistent. Braun and Bryan (2006) found that the perceived dominance of men was related to the desire for a short-term, sexual relationship, but not a long-term relationship. However, they found that men's body shape had little to do with the perception of dominance. In contrast, other research in which body shape was manipulated found that muscularity, a variable closely related to WCR, was associated with perceived dominance (Frederick & Haselton, 2007). Although they did not directly explore dominance as a potential mediator of the relationship between WCR and attractiveness, Frederick and Haselton (2007) did find a similar pattern to Braun and Bryan's (2006) research. Specifically, women rated men described as "brawny," "built," or "toned" (i.e., low WCR) as both more dominant and sexual desirable, but less likely to be committed to a partner, than men described as "slender," "typical," or "chubby," indicating the possibility that dominance may mediate the relationship, particularly for short-term, sexual relationships. In other empirical work, dominance has been conceptualized as three separate types: physical, social, and financial (Bryan et al., 2011); perceived physical dominance was rated as important for both short-term (sexual) relationships and long-term relationships, whereas perceived social dominance was rated as important only for long-term relationships. Perceived financial dominance was related to neither. However, this research did not consider the impact of body shape on these perceptions. Therefore, we tested the possibility that a tripartite conceptualization of dominance would mediate the relationship between body shape (i.e., WCR) and perceived attractiveness and shed light on the previously mixed findings.

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