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Sexual activity is inversely related to women's perceptions of the facial attractiveness of unknown men

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Abstract

A study was conducted to assess whether individual differences in sexual activity during the past 30 days, in particular penile–vaginal intercourse (PVI; which is associated with measures of relationship quality), are related to the perception of the facial attractiveness of unknown men. Forty-five women reported the frequency of a variety of sexual behaviors and rated the facial attractiveness and friendliness of 24 men. Women who reported more frequent orgasm from masturbation rated men as less friendly. This finding might be reflective of the more anti-social attitude associated with more frequent masturbation. The results also show that women who engaged more frequently in most kinds of sexual behavior, not only PVI, considered unknown men to be less facially attractive. That is, individuals who engage more frequently in a variety of sexual behaviors with their partner perceived unknown men as less attractive and thereby may be less susceptible to the lure of other (or if the only sexual behavior is masturbation, any) men.

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1. Sexual activity is inversely related women's perceived facial attractiveness of unknown men

One important factor for both men and women when considering sexual partners is physical attractiveness. According to the “good genes” hypothesis, this is because physical attractiveness is a valid marker for overall phenotypic quality (see [Thornhill & Gangestad, 1999](#)). In fact, women (especially when ovulating) consider men with more masculine faces to be more attractive ([Johnston, Hagel, Franklin, Fink, & Grammer, 2001](#); [Penton-Voak & Perrett, 2000](#); [Penton-Voak et al., 1999](#)) and facial masculinity has been shown to correlate positively with self-reported health in men ([Thornhill & Gangestad, 2006](#)). However, according to strategic pluralism theory, women have to trade signs of a man's genetic fitness for signs of his ability and willingness to invest in potential offspring ([Gangestad & Simpson, 2000](#)). In this vein, [Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, and Giles \(1999\)](#) found that women who were asked to indicate the relative importance of several characteristics of partners for a dating or marital relationship considered warmth/trustworthiness most important, followed by attractive/vitality (both considerably more important than status/resources.) However, perceived warmth is positively related to babyfacedness ([Berry & McArthur, 1986](#)) – a facial type quite opposite to what makes a face masculine. Thus, with regard to long term relationships, physical attractiveness is only one of several criteria important for women's choice of a partner.

However, with regard to short-term relationships, men's and women's preferences are more aligned, such that both sexes prioritize physical attractiveness ([Li & Kenrick, 2006](#)). Interestingly, women who rated their current partners as low in sexual attractiveness reported more desire for men not their partners near ovulation than when fertility was low, suggesting a clear link between the attractiveness of the long term partner and the desire to associate with a different short-term partner when the personal reproductive implications were potentially greatest. These results suggest that the sexual relationship with current partners affects the way in which potential partners are perceived. More specifically, they may indicate that the fulfillment of sexual needs with a partner reduces sexual desires outside the current relationship. However, no study has assessed to what degree individual differences in sexual behavior are related to the perception of other men. The present study addresses this question.

Women with steady romantic relationships manifest considerable individual differences in the frequency with which they engage in various sexual behaviors, and this may impact both their relationship with the partner and their interest in men outside the partnership. It has been found that the frequency of penile–vaginal intercourse (PVI), but not of other sexual behaviors, is correlated positively with a number of relationship quality components as well as with global relationship quality ([Costa & Brody, 2007](#)). This might imply that the sexual needs of a woman who engages more frequently in PVI are better satisfied and therefore she may be less motivated to seek out other partners. Yet, motivations and goals influence the degree to which we attend to, as well as how we judge social stimuli ([Neuberg, Kenrick, Maner, & Schaller, 2005](#)), and even distort the very perception process on which such judgments are based (see [Balci et al., 2006](#)). Thus, the goal of the present study was to assess to what degree individual differences in the frequency of sexual activity in the last 30 days, in particular, frequency of PVI, are related to the perceptions of the facial attractiveness of unknown men. Specifically, [Costa and Brody \(2007\)](#) found PVI frequency (and orgasm) but not other sexual behaviors, to be related to relationship quality and satisfaction. Hence we predicted that women who report higher rates of

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