
The Visual Process Method: A New Method to Study Physical Attractiveness

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The visual process method is a computer-aided procedure that allows for the recording of the viewing sequence, viewing time, and amount of information used with respect to various face and body parts in judgments of physical attractiveness. A study with 26 male and 44 female participants demonstrated the reliability and validity of the data gathered with this method. In agreement with evolutionary psychology, features associated with the mate value of the individual—youthfulness, health, sexual maturity for female targets, and status and dominance for male targets—were looked at sooner and more often. © 1998 Elsevier Science Inc.

KEY WORDS: Physical attractiveness; Evolution; Face; Waist-to-hip ratio

Man has tried for centuries to discover the secret of beauty and to identify the features responsible for physical attractiveness (mostly of the face). In classical times, attempts were made to define beauty with geometric regularity such as the golden section, or with the equal division of the face based on the magic number seven (Cook and McHenry 1978; Hatfield and Sprecher 1986; Liggett 1974). Others, such as Aristotle and later Galton (1878) and Treu (1914), viewed the golden mean—a kind of average—as a guarantee for beauty.

For a long time, the attempts to objectively determine the basis of physical attractiveness went without success, and the hope of finding such a basis plunged when a study by Ford and Beach (1951) examining more than 200 technologically primitive societies failed to find any universal standard of beauty. Given such a result, sayings such as “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” seem all the more justified. Berscheid and Walster [Hatfield] (1974: 178), who show in an enlightening overview the

Received September 8, 1997; revised January 6, 1998.

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countless consequences of physical attractiveness, also are forced to pass on the question of the nature of beauty and state, "it is the total Gestalt which is important."

It is only in the last few years that researchers from a sociobiological or evolutionary psychological background have had success in coming closer to the material basis of physical attractiveness. According to them (Barber 1995; Buss 1994; Cunningham 1986; Cunningham et al. 1990), beautiful people are those who signal they have a high mate value. In women, this primarily means youthfulness, health, and sexual maturity. The physical attractiveness of a woman's face thus depends on features that indicate her youthfulness (for example, in proportion to her face, large, widely spaced eyes; Jones 1995), her sexual maturity (e.g., proportionally high and narrow cheek bones), and her health (e.g., smooth, clear skin; Cunningham 1986). A male's attractiveness, on the other hand, depends on features that indicate that he is able and willing to provide for his offspring and that he is a winner in intrasexual competition. Men who signal their high status, show their dominance (for example, with a strong chin), and, at the same time, appear to be friendly are judged as more attractive than men who do not exhibit these and similar features (Cunningham, et al. 1990).

For judgments of physical attractiveness of a person's body shape, the waist-to-hip ratio (WHR), an indicator of the distribution of body fat, has seemed to be of primary importance (Singh 1993, 1995). Women who come close to a WHR of 0.7 are deemed more attractive than those with a higher WHR. Male bodies with a WHR of 0.9 are preferred over those with other ratios. The importance of the WHR for physical attractiveness also can be explained by evolutionary principles. Women with a WHR of 0.7 signal higher mate value; they have a higher level of circulating estrogen, become pregnant more easily than women with a higher WHR, and are in many aspects healthier than other women (for a detailed discussion of the correlates of female WHR see Singh 1993). Male body fat distribution also is regulated by sex hormones (in this case, circulating testosterone), and men whose WHR is between 0.8 and 0.9 have better health than those with lower or higher WHRs (for a discussion of male WHR see Singh 1995).

Studies in which the identification of the role of certain features or feature combinations is the goal usually examined objectively measurable stimulus qualities as predictors of physical attractiveness in a multiple regression. This allows a mathematical calculation of the relative importance of the selected parameters. Alternatively, certain features will be experimentally manipulated so that the consequences of these changes can be analyzed. For example, Cunningham (1986) measured features of youthfulness, sexual maturity, and expressiveness in beauty queens and calculated the multiple correlations with physical attractiveness as the criterion. Features from all three categories contributed to attractiveness ratings. Singh (1993, 1995) experimentally manipulated body shape and studied the effect of this manipulation on the judgments of physical attractiveness.

Whether people actively look for features that inform them of the mate value of men and women when judging the physical attractiveness of strangers remains an open question. Evolutionarily speaking, we can expect that face and body features that signal mate value not only influence the amount of perceived attractiveness, but also will draw more attention and will be processed more quickly than other face and body parts.

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