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More than just skin-deep? A pilot study integrating physical and non-physical factors in the perception of physical attractiveness

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Abstract

The perceived beauty of a potential partner has traditionally been explained in terms of physical characteristics such as body weight and the waist-to-hip ratio (WHR), while non-physical characteristics have been neglected. This study looked at the contribution of body weight, WHR and personality to ratings of overall female attractiveness. Seventy-six participants rated 30 line drawings that varied 2 levels of personality (introverted, extraverted), 3 levels of body weight and 5 of WHR. Effect sizes were largest for body weight (0.58), followed by personality (0.25) and finally WHR (0.10). There were significant interactions between all three variables, with effect sizes ranging between (0.3 and 0.4). These results highlight the importance of examining non-physical characteristics when studying perceptions of human beauty, a finding consistent with the notion that beauty is more than just skin-deep.

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Keywords: Physical attractiveness; Non-physical attractiveness; Body weight; Waist-to-hip ratio; Personality

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1. Introduction

The topic of human beauty continues to be one that attracts considerable debate and controversy both within psychological and popular circles (e.g., Swami, *in press*; Swami & Furnham, 2006). In the past decade, a productive field of research has examined perceptions of male and female bodily attractiveness (e.g., Singh, 1993; Tovée, Maisey, Emery, & Cornelissen, 1998; Tovée, Hancock, Mahmoodi, Singleton, & Cornelissen, 2002; Wilson, Tripp, & Boland, 2005), with some recent studies taking a cross-cultural perspective (e.g., Sugiyama, 2004; Swami & Tovée, 2005a; Swami, Antonakopoulos, Tovée, & Furnham, 2006; Swami, Caprario, Tovée, & Furnham, 2006). These studies have typically examined the relative contribution of body shape and weight measures to ratings of female physical attractiveness.

In one of the earliest studies of physical attractiveness, Singh (1993) argued that the waist-to-hip ratio (WHR), a measure of body shape, is a better predictor of female attractiveness judgments than overall body weight. He presented evidence showing that a low WHR is associated with higher levels of fertility, and went on to argue that the WHR acts a first-pass filter, excluding women who are unhealthy or have low reproductive capability. Evidence for this has been reported in a number of countries using line-drawn stimuli developed by Singh (e.g., Furnham, Tan, & McManus, 1997). However, some investigators have argued that such findings are an artefact of the experimental design. The line drawings and photographic stimuli used in these studies appeared to confound body weight and shape measures.

When researchers have investigated the relative importance of body shape and weight (the latter quantified as the body mass index, or BMI) using photographs of real women (e.g., Puhl & Boland, 2001; Tovée, Maisey, et al., 1998, 2002; Tovée & Cornelissen, 2001) and three-dimensional images (Fan, Liu, Wu, & Dai, 2004), variation in BMI appears to be the greater predictor of female attractiveness than WHR. These effects cannot simply be explained by the stimuli not adequately capturing shape cues, as when pictures of men are used in the same format, attractiveness is typically determined by shape cues rather than BMI (Maisey, Vale, Cornelissen, & Tovée, 1999; Swami & Tovée, 2005b), thus demonstrating that shape cues are salient in this format. These results also hold when cross-cultural data sets are examined (e.g., Swami & Tovée, 2005a; Swami, Antonakopoulos, et al., 2006; Swami, Caprario, et al., 2006), and psychosocial explanations for these have been postulated (e.g., Swami & Tovée, 2006).

Of course, the relative ranges of BMI and WHR in these studies are unequal, and the WHR seems to be a more important predictor of attractiveness within a normal or average BMI range (cf. Streeter & McBurney, 2003; Wilson et al., 2005). More recent conceptualisations of the WHR hypothesis of attractiveness have also shifted away from the notion of it being a first-pass filter (e.g., Marlowe & Wetsman, 2001; Marlowe, Apicella, & Reed, 2005). Sugiyama (2004), for example, has presented evidence of a male preference for WHRs lower-than-the-local-female-average WHR, which takes into account the effect of parasitic loads and nutrition in increasing or decreasing local WHRs ranges. Within this paradigm, the WHR is one of several factors influencing physical attractiveness, with such factors as body weight, skin colour and facial attractiveness all also playing major roles.

The theoretical background behind most such studies stems from the evolutionary psychological idea that human physical attractiveness should be seen as an assessment of fitness value, indexed by such factors as fecundity or health (Buss, 1994, 1999). Within this view, the most

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