GENDER SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN PREFERENCES FOR SPECIFIC BODY PARTS

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ABSTRACT

This research investigated gender similarities and differences in preferences for specific body parts in an ideal mate. 137 participants indicated the degree to which they desired their ideal version of a particular body part in their ideal mate. Whereas conventional wisdom dictates that women's physical appearance is more important to men than is men's appearance to women, results indicated that (a) women preferred body parts predictive of strength and overall fitness, (b) men preferred body parts predictive of fertility, and (c) both men and women preferred body parts predictive of overall health. Implications for theories of mate selection are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

For most people, the physical appearance of their mate is critical. Conventional wisdom and popular culture, not to mention empirical research, has emphasized the relative importance of the female body to the mate selection process (Buss, 2004). In a cross-cultural survey of sexual patterns of almost 300 societies, Gregerson (1982) concluded that whereas the female body is of "pre-eminent" concern for mate selection, the male body is an afterthought to his economic status and social skills (see also Ford & Beach, 1951). However, from an evolutionary perspective, a preference for an attractive and healthy mate--whether they be a man or women--is clear: We prefer a physically attractive partner because it predicts their health, fitness, and in women, their fertility (Buss, 2004; Thiessen & Gregg, 1980). However, not all aspects of another's physical appearance is predictive of health and fitness; and moreover, the physical features that are relevant to men's attractiveness are not the same as those that are relevant to women's. In this paper, I investigated preferences for different body parts in an ideal mate, explored whether these preferences align with hypothesized predictors of health and fitness, and investigated whether gender differences for specific body parts aligns with theory.

Preferences for Specific Body Parts

Evolutionary psychology posits that humans have developed specific psychological mechanisms to discriminate those individuals capable of fulfilling their reproductive goals from those less capable of fulfilling reproductive goals (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992). Individuals who possess and act on these preferences are more evolutionarily successful than those who do not. One characteristic critical for successful mating is the health of the potential mating partner. Health is associated with an individual's well-being (Shackelford & Larsen, 1999), longevity (Henderson & Anglin, 2003), ability to nurture and invest in offspring (Cunningham, 1986; Thornhill & Gangestad, 1983), and psychological health (Shackelford & Larson, 1997). The importance of health to mate selection is evident in men's and women's preferences. For instance, in 37 different cultures, both men and women judged good health to be indispensable in a marriage partner (Buss et al., 1990).

Empirical and cross-cultural research indicates that several body parts are especially important to predicting health. In a series of landmark ethnographic surveys designed to understand human sexual behavior, Ford and Beach (1951) argued that despite varying manifestations and expressions of different body parts across cultures, humans from around the world have expressed a preference for healthy-looking eyes, lips, skin, and complexion. They argue further that those body parts are highly desired because of their ability to predict an individual's health. They found that in every culture, clear eyes, full lips, and a clear complexion were highly desirable; and in no culture, did they find that bloodshot or yellow eyes, chapped or scarred lips, or heavily-blemished skin were desirable.

Ford and Beach (1951) are not alone when they suggest that eyes, lips, and skin are critical predictors of health. Research investigating fluctuating facial asymmetry also suggests a link between health and a preference for eyes, lips, and skin. Møller, Soler, and Thornhill (1995) demonstrated that, across species, facial asymmetry is associated with reduced survival rates and number of offspring compared with those individuals who are least facially asymmetric. Some health problems detrimental to facial symmetry--and detrimental as well to proximal body parts such as eyes, lips, and skin (Mitton & Grant, 1984; Møller et al., 1995; Thornhill & Sauer, 1992)--include (a) parasitic invasion (Gangestad et al., 1994), which influences the quality of the skin and complexion; and (b) extreme temperature and pollutants (Parson, 1990), which influences the appearance and function of body parts, such as the eyes, lips, and skin.

What Body Parts Do Women Desire in Men?

Men and women have faced different evolutionary histories, and as a result, have evolved sex-specific psychological mechanisms designed to solve problems specific to their sex. A problem women faced in their evolutionary past was finding a mate who was able to (a) protect her and her children from predators, and (b) provide resources for her and her children (Buss & Barnes, 1986; Ellis, 1992). Several different body parts have been hypothesized to be predictive of a man's ability to fulfill these needs.

A man's ability to provide for a mate and her offspring usually manifests itself in resource accumulation abilities and dominance (Buss & Barnes, 1986). One physical predictor of dominance is height and physical stature (Graziano, Brothen, & Berscheid, 1978). According to Mazur, Mazur, and Keating (1984), height provides a physical advantage in physical confrontation with adversaries. Height is also linked to two other factors important to success in physical confrontations, namely, overall muscle mass and strength (Haldene, 1985). As might be expected, American women judge short men to be less desirable as mates, and they find tall, physically strong, athletic men to be most desirable (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Jackson, 1992).

Another predictor of a man's ability to provide is upper body strength. Women demonstrate a strong preference for a tapered "V" physique in men (Lavrakas, 1975; Wiggins, Wiggins, & Conger, 1968). Renzetter and Curran (1989) propose that the upper body strength is an adaptation to the problem of confronting and defending against large prey. They argued that those body parts that best predict the ability to defend against predators are arms, chest, arms, and shoulders.

What Body Parts Do Men Desire in Women?

Because a man's genetic survival is tied to his mate's reproductive value (Symons, 1979), men place great value on the three general predictors of the female body: youth, health, and fertility (Thiessen & Gregg, 1980). Because physical cues provide important observable evidence of a woman's reproductive value, ancestral men evolved a preference for women who displayed these cues. Men who do not prefer those attributes that signaled good reproductive value would have left fewer offspring than those who did.

As a result, body parts men prefer are aspects of a woman's physique that best reflect her reproductive abilities (Buss, 2004; Geary, Vigil, & Byrd-Craven, 2004; Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002; Symons, 1979). Empirical evidence indicates that several specific body parts are predictive of reproductive potential. Singh and Young (1995) argued for the direct link between a woman's fertility and her buttocks and hips. They proposed that a woman's waist-to-hip ratio (WHR) is critical to identifying a fertile woman. A low WHR (0.7) is considered feminine, and generally, the most attractive. WHR not only predicts risk to disease and the number of offspring, but also a woman's sex hormone profile (Singh, 1993). As might be expected by the strong link between WHR and fertility (Brown, 1993), research in a variety of cultural contexts has shown that a low wait-to-hip ratio is reliably correlated with attractiveness judgments (Furnham, McClelland, & Omer, 2003; Singh & Luis, 1994).

Purpose of this Study

Whereas past research has taken an interest in the condition of various body parts (e.g., "What eye shape is most attractive?" or "What length of hair do men prefer most?"), the current research was interested in which body parts men and women preferred. There is particular utility to this approach: This approach provides for understanding the degree to which specific body parts are important to others. To which body parts do men and women attend, and about which body parts do they care? This approach allows us to explore gender differences in preference for particular body parts, as well as the degree to which men and women differ in their preference for those specific body parts.

In this study, men and women were asked to indicate their preferences for specific body parts in an ideal mate partner. I investigated several hypotheses. First, I expected both men and women to prefer body parts that predict overall health; in particular, there should be a universal preference eyes, skin, and complexion. I would also expect that body parts associated with health should be preferred more than body parts unassociated with health. Second, I anticipated sex differences for those body parts associated with sex-specific fitness: Men should prefer body parts associated with a woman's fertility (e.g., hips, legs), whereas women should prefer body parts associated with strength and dominance (e.g., arms, shoulders, height).

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 56 male and 82 female heterosexual undergraduates at a small university in New England. Individuals participated in partial fulfillment of a requirement for an introductory psychology course. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 28 ($M = 19.40$, $SD = 2.43$).

Procedure

Participants were escorted into a small laboratory. Each participant was assured that all of the information within the surveys would kept completely anonymous. As part of a larger battery of questionnaires, participants completed the *Body Parts Satisfaction Scale* (BPSS; Berscheid, Walster, & Bohrnstedt, 1973). The BPSS is a list of 21 body parts each judged on a 5-point scale (1 = *no opinion*, 5 = *very desirable*). The scale included the following items: abdomen, ankles, arms, buttocks, chest, chin, complexion, eyes, feet, general muscle development, general muscle tone, hands, height, hips, legs, lips, shoulders, skin, teeth, voice, and weight. The instructions were as follows:

Please consider each item on the following list very carefully. How desirable is it for you to have an ideal version of the body parts listed below present in your ideal mate? Use this scale: "1" represents "no opinion," "2-3" means "slightly desirable," "3-4" represents "somewhat desirable," and "5" represents "very desirable."

After completing the questionnaire, participants were debriefed about the nature of the study, thanked for their time, and dismissed.

RESULTS

Most and Least Valued Body Parts

Each of the 21 body parts was ranked from most desirable to least desirable (based on a 1-5 scale). The most preferred body parts were: chest ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.91$), weight ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 0.89$), teeth ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.92$), buttocks ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.97$), and eyes ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.23$); whereas the least preferred body parts were ankles ($M = 1.45$, $SD = 1.19$), feet ($M = 1.80$, $SD = 1.15$), neck ($M = 1.80$, $SD = 1.11$), chin ($M = 1.80$, $SD = 1.08$), and shoulders ($M = 2.06$, $SD = 1.03$).

Preferences by gender

When parsing preferences by gender, men ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 0.66$) did not express a greater overall preference averaged across all of the body parts than did women ($M = 2.41$, $SD = 0.57$), $t(136) = 1.08$, $p = .28$. As illustrated in Table 1, men and women each expressed greater preference for four body parts. Men preferred legs, hips, buttocks, and ankles more than did women. Women, more than men, expressed a preference for general muscle tone, general muscle development, arms, and shoulders.

Table 1. Preferences for Body Parts by Sex

Body Part	Male Rank	Male participants		Female Rank	Female participants		Gender difference	
		M	*SD*		*M*	*SD*	*t*(136)	*p*
Chest	1	4.13	1.01	3	3.84	0.83	1.79	.07
Buttocks	2	4.09	0.95	9	3.68	0.95	2.45	<.05*
Legs	3	4.04	1.00	16	3.27	1.03	4.33	<.05*
Weight	4	4.00	0.95	7	3.78	0.84	1.42	.15
Hips	5	3.98	0.90	18	2.76	1.24	6.32	<.05*
Teeth	6	3.87	0.88	2	3.84	0.96	0.19	.84
Eyes	7	3.77	1.22	6	3.78	1.24	-0.05	.95
Facial Complexion	8	3.68	1.06	10	3.60	0.98	0.46	.64
Skin	9	3.64	1.12	4	3.79	0.84	-0.92	.35
Abdomen	10	3.62	1.14	12	3.46	1.06	0.80	.42
Voice	11	3.61	1.03	14	3.37	1.00	1.33	.18
Lips	12	3.60	0.97	11	3.44	1.06	0.89	.37
Height	13	3.54	1.00	5	3.78	0.93	-1.45	.14
Muscle tone	14	3.53	1.05	1	3.87	0.79	-2.14	<.05*
Hands	15	3.32	1.20	15	3.34	1.09	-0.10	.91
Muscle development	16	3.29	1.06	8	3.73	0.84	-2.68	<.05*
Feet	17	3.02	1.02	20	2.65	1.21	1.87	.06
Neck	18	2.95	1.11	19	2.71	1.10	1.23	.22
Arms	19	2.95	0.99	13	3.43	1.03	-2.73	<.05*
Shoulders	20	2.82	1.01	17	3.23	1.03	-2.25	<.05*
Ankles	21	2.70	1.09	21	2.28	1.24	2.02	<.05*

Note. Scores range from 1 (*no opinion*) to 5 (*very desirable*) *$p < .05$.

Factor Analysis

A factor analysis was conducted to identify the factors underlying the preferences for specific body parts. I conducted a maximum likelihood factor analysis with Kaiser Normalization rotation, which resulted in a five-factor solution which accounted for 62% of the variance. The number of factors retained was determined by examination of the scree plot and eigenvalues. Correlation coefficients between the factors varied between -.18 and .41, indicating that an oblique rotation was appropriate.

As illustrated in Table 2, the first factor, fertility traits, contained six items and relates to those body parts associated with women's fertility (e.g., hips, legs, buttocks, and waist). The second factor, general fitness, relates to those traits that indicate an individual's general fitness level. The third factor, strength traits, indicates body parts associated with upper body strength and fitness. The fourth factor, health traits, relates to those body parts associated with overall health. The final factor, non-health traits, is associated with those body parts without clear health or fitness associations.

Table 2. Factor Loadings for the Factors Analysis using Oblimin Rotation

Body Part	Factors				
	1	2	3	4	5
Buttocks	**0.87**	0.02	-0.05	0.11	-0.13
Legs	**0.74**	-0.13	-0.01	0.01	0.14
Hips	**0.65**	0.13	0.10	0.00	0.26
Chest	**0.60**	-0.11	-0.16	0.09	0.01
Abdomen	**0.47**	-0.19	-0.26	-0.01	0.08
Muscle tone	0.00	**-0.92**	-0.08	-0.04	-0.06
Muscle development	0.00	**-0.89**	-0.13	-0.01	-0.05
Height	0.07	**-0.33**	0.11	0.18	0.21
Shoulders	-0.01	-0.14	**-0.76**	-0.02	0.16
Arms	0.12	-0.13	**-0.75**	0.01	-0.03
Hands	0.22	0.05	**-0.39**	0.26	-0.03
Skin	0.04	-0.03	0.05	**0.80**	0.02
Lips	0.13	0.00	-0.14	**0.58**	0.04
Complexion	-0.07	0.01	-0.11	**0.58**	0.23
Eyes	0.08	-0.08	-0.08	**0.52**	-0.19
Teeth	0.11	-0.15	-0.10	**0.42**	-0.02
Voice	0.19	-0.01	-0.02	**0.30**	0.07
Ankles	0.16	-0.12	-0.14	-0.12	**0.67**
Feet	0.17	0.07	-0.13	0.07	**0.64**
Weight	0.02	-0.29	0.12	0.23	**0.41**
Neck	-0.09	0.02	-0.26	0.28	**0.39**
Correlations among factors					
Factor 1	--				
Factor 2	-.35	--			
Factor 3	-.41	.38	--		
Factor 4	.48	-.38	-.31	--	
Factor 5	.40	-.23	-.18	.36	--

Note. Loadings in bold are values above 0.30.

Gender Differences in Body Part Preferences

The items from the five factors were combined into composite variables: fertility, alpha = .87; general fitness, alpha = .73; strength, alpha = .78; health, alpha = .74; and non-health, alpha = .73. To examine sex differences for each of the five factors, *t*-tests were conducted for the five factors. As illustrated in Table 3, whereas men desired fertility and non-health traits more than did women, women preferred general fitness and strength traits more than men. As expected, the gender difference for health traits was not significant, $t(136) = -0.35, p = .72$.

Table 3. Gender Differences by Factor

	Male participants		Female participants		Gender difference	
Factor	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*(136)	*p*
General fitness	2.47	0.84	2.79	0.69	-2.45	<.05*
Fertility	2.96	0.85	2.40	0.81	3.91	<.05*
Strength	2.02	0.89	2.33	0.88	-1.99	<.05*
Health	2.68	0.75	2.63	0.65	-0.35	.72
Non-health	2.16	0.73	1.85	0.81	2.26	<.05*

Note. Scores range from 1 (*no opinion*) to 5 (*very desirable*) **p < .05.*

Desirability of Health Predicting Traits

An additional analysis was conducted to investigate whether men and women preferred health-predicting traits more than traits that did not predict health.

To address this questions, I conducted a 2 (gender) × 5 (trait: fertility, general fitness, strength, health, non-health) repeated measures ANOVA with gender as a between factor and trait as the repeated factor. The main effect for gender was not significant, $F(1, 136) = 0.28$, $p = .59$. The main effect for trait was significant, $F(1, 136) = 41.55$, $p < .05$, as was the Gender × Trait interaction, $F(1, 136) = 15.59$, $p < .05$.

This interaction was explored using planned comparisons. To determine whether individuals preferred health traits to non-health traits, I investigated specifically the Health/Non-health × Gender contrast. The Health/Non-health × Gender interaction was not significant, $F(1, 136) = 0.53$, $p = .46$, but the main effect for health/non-health was significant, $F(1, 136) = 100.20$, $p < .05$, indicating that both men and women expressed a greater preference for health traits compared with non-health traits.

DISCUSSION

This research supports the proposition that men and women have both similarities and differences in the preferences they possess in an ideal mate. This research revealed that (a) there was a universal interest in body parts predictive of health, (b) women preferred body parts associated with health and overall fitness, (c) men preferred body parts associated with health and women's fertility, and (d) both men and women expressed a greater preference for body parts associated with health over those not associated with health.

The focus of this research explored the degree to which men and women preferred a particular body part, and did not focus on the actual condition of the body part. For example, this research did not explore what each participant believed to be their ideal version of each body part-- although men valued "lips" more than did women, how are we to know if men were thinking of "thick, full lips" rather than "thin lips"? And if participants were thinking of "thin lips" while rating lips, would not that call into question the findings of this study? Not necessarily. For body parts associated with health, there is a strong consensus on what is considered to be the idealized version (Buss et al., 1990; Ford & Beach, 1951). Thus, this research contributes findings which

help illuminate both general mate preferences, as well as mate preferences specific to gender; specifically, that men preferred fertility-predicting traits, and women preferred strength-predicting traits.

The results are consistent with past research on gender-specific preferences: Both men and women expressed preferences for health-predicting body parts, women were expected to prefer body parts associated with dominance and strength, and men were expected to prefer body parts associated with fertility and youth. In addition, the findings are consistent with past research on body esteem. Franzoi and Herzog (1987), for example, found that both men and women expressed a preference for physical condition, waist, and chest/breast in an ideal mate. However, is it possible that these findings are merely consistent with social norms? Culture does place a strong emphasis on many body parts, including the waist, hips, and chest. However, it is important to note that whereas the preferred form of the specific body part may differ across culture, it is likely that the gender differences in the body parts that are preferred are also consistent across cultures (Buss et al., 2000; Ford & Beach, 1951). Although what is perceived to be western standards are influenced by the media, parents, discotheque trendsetters, and friends, it appears that those preferences are not arbitrary; instead, they reflect evolutionary cues to fertility, health, and more generally, one's value as a mate partner.

In summary, this research has specifically categorized preferences for different body parts men and women prefer. Whereas previous research has emphasized a general male preferences for physical appearance, this research indicates that both men and women care about physical appearance to the extent that it predicts health and gender-specific fitness.

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