

Physical Attributes and Physical Attractiveness

Ellen Choi, Jamie Kim, Robert Pasnak

George Mason University

Abstract: *The physical attributes of men (such as hair color, skin color, and so on) are likely to vary in their physical attractiveness to women. Fifty-five heterosexual females from a northern Virginia university that enrolled students of many ethnicities were surveyed. Most male physical characteristics (hair length or styles, body hair, body types, and many other characteristics) did not make any significant differences in female preferences. Skin color, height, and penis size did matter. There were some ethnic differences. These results in part confirmed previous reports and in part disagreed. Few studies on this subject amount to more than speculation in popular literature, and most involve the preferences of men rather than women. Limitations of the present study were discussed. This is a potentially fruitful area of study for evolutionary biologists, psychologists and sociologists, and others.*

Male Physical Attributes and Attractiveness to Women

There have been many speculations, most of them in blogs or popular magazines, about what physical features of one sex are especially important determinants of attractiveness to the opposite sex. The advent of evolutionary biology had heightened interest in this subject matter and a few studies have been done. Among the findings that have emerged are the importance of height – women tend to be more attracted to taller men (Buss, 2003). Skin color also matters, with fair-skinned women being preferred in many or even all cultures (Frost, 2005). Men also tend to be attracted to women with long hair (Buss, 2005). Preferences for eye-color may also show differences that have some ethnic roots. Brown-eyed men have no preferences, but blue-eyed men prefer blue-eyed women (Laing, Mathison, & Johnson, 2007). These are only a few of the findings reported. The majority of studies have focused on male preferences (Frederick, Fessler, & Haselton, 2005; Gangestad, Merriman, & Thompson, 2010; Honekopp, Rudolph, Beirer, Liebert, & Muller, 2007; although some researchers have studied the preferences of women (Hunt, Breuker, Sadowski, & Moore, 2009; Paley, 2000).

Some male characteristics in addition to height (e.g., hair color, eye color, skin color) are likely to be more important than others in determining how attractive the man is to women. Today's young man also features adornments that were previously uncommon in American society – piercings, more tattoos and more extensive tattoos, and a variety of hair styles. The present study was conducted in part to determine which physical attributes were considered more attractive than others. Because it seemed likely that certain physical attributes are more attractive for certain ethnic groups, relationships between ethnicities and the attractiveness of male physical attributes were examined as well.

Method

Participants

The present study was conducted in a large university with one of the most racially and ethnically diverse student bodies in the USA. Fifty-five heterosexual women volunteered to participate. Data from male or nonheterosexual participants was excluded from the analysis.

Procedure

A survey was created on Google Documents. A link was then created and posted on a website available to students enrolled in an introductory psychology course. There were a variety of questions addressing what the participant thought about the attractiveness of men's physical characteristics, with a few random questions used to determine the credibility of the participant's responses. The questions asked in the survey covered various parts of the body, including the

attractiveness of someone’s hands, muscularity, tattoos, facial or bodily hair, the preferred height in a male partner, preferred body type, hair type and color, and sexual characteristics. Preferred ethnicity and various other questions were asked in order to discover any potential relations between physical attributes and ethnicities.

Results

Table 1. *Ethnic Differences in Preferences for Skin Color and Height*

Ethnicity	Skin Color	
	Fair/lightly Tanned	Heavily Tanned/Dark
Asian/Caucasian	26	7
African American	0	8
	Height	
	5’0’’ – 5’11’’	6’0’’ – 6’11’’
Asian	5	1
African American/Caucasian	7	29

The data were analyzed with Chi square, Fisher’s test of exact probabilities or Pearson’s product moment coefficient, as appropriate for the level of measurement for each question. There were surprisingly few significant differences. Hair characteristics and color made no significant differences in the preferences of the heterosexual women regardless of ethnicity. Neither did eye color, nose or lip shapes, body types, physical flaws, piercings or tattoos, or facial or body hair. There were also no ethnic differences in which part of men’s bodies were most important for physical attractiveness. What did emerge was that women of different ethnicities differed in their preference for skin color. Nearly 80% of Caucasians preferred light skin and all of the African Americans preferred darker skin, $X^2(1) = 17.23, p < .001$ (See Table 1). Twenty-nine per cent of the women said they had no preference – these were primarily Latino, Asian, or multiracial women. There was also an ethnic difference in preference for men’s heights, with Caucasians and African-Americans having more of a preference for tall men than Asians, Fisher’s exact probability test yielding $p < .001$ (See Table 1). Other results did not reflect ethnicity, but did provide confirmations of commonly accepted propositions. Men’s penis size was a determinant of their physical attractiveness to heterosexual women, $X^2(2) = 6.60, p < .05$. Forty-four percent preferred men with large penises, while only 19% said penis size made no difference. Finally, preference for men with tattoos was correlated with preference for men with piercings, $r(53) = .40, p < .002$.

Table 2. *Importance of Penis Size to Physical Attractiveness*

Large Preferred	No Preference	Small Penis Preferred
24	10	18

Discussion

Some of the findings echo those of other researchers. For example, Paley (2000) also reported that heterosexual females preferred men with large penises. However, the finding that eye color made no difference does not support the report that eye color mattered (), and Frost’s () assertion that preference for light skin was universal, even for dark-skinned men, was directly contradicted.

The major ethnic difference that emerged, apart from preferences in skin color, was that Asian women did *not* prefer tall men, unlike women of all other ethnicities. Perhaps this is because Asian women tend to be shorter than other women, and the height of a shorter man would be more in proportion to the height of the woman.

The correlation between liking tattoos and liking piercings is not hard to understand; both types of body modification are *avantgarde*, reflecting a departure from previous societal norms. However, it is clear that men did not gain an advantage in competition with other males by such modifications. Neither did differences in hair style, length, or nature convey any advantage to a man in the eyes of these heterosexual women.

Perhaps the most informative aspect of the data is the number of male characteristics that made no difference. One might expect from popular literature that facial hair, body hair, body types,

various parts of men's bodies, and shapes of parts of the face would make a difference in women's preferences. None such emerged, either overall or for specific ethnic groups. Hence it may be that for women, physical attraction to men tends to rest on more subtle characteristics, such as the man's bearing, projection of confidence, or other personal characteristics. An alternative, of course, is that if the women studied had been more homogenous in ethnicity and more numerous, small differences would have emerged that were not apparent from our sample. This is a subject matter that invites more data-driven reports and fewer popular speculations. This is especially true as regards the preferences of women for male characteristics, which have been less studied than the converse.

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Ellen Choi graduated from George Mason University in Spring of 2013 with a Bachelor's in Sociology and a minor in Psychology. She worked with Dr. Robert Pasnak as a Research Assistant for over a year on this project. Before working on the project Ellen interned at the Alternative House, a refuge for abused and homeless children, located in Vienna, VA.



Jamie Kim graduated from George Mason University in the spring of 2013 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology with a minor in Sociology. While working with Dr. Robert Pasnak for the following year, she has also begun to pursue her Master of Science degree in Clinical Psychology and is pursuing a BCBA certification.



Dr. Robert Pasnak has been a member of the Department of Psychology of George Mason University since 1972. During his tenure he has published four books and well over 50 research papers. Most of the latter have involved graduate and undergraduate students as co-researchers and co-authors. The current paper is an example, and represents a ne