

Mirror, Mirror: An Exploratory Study of Students' Perceptions of Attractiveness

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Introduction

Attractiveness is defined as having the power to attract and also being pleasing to the eye or mind. Individual, social, and cultural factors strongly influence these patterns, such as norms, values, status, occupational, marital, religious, or ethnic considerations¹. Attractiveness is studied to improve self-esteem, improve body image, to find potential dates, to find potential marriage partners, for marketing and advertising, for mate selection, and to enhance reproductive success and viability.

Several components are taken into consideration when defining attractiveness such as averageness, symmetry, sexual dimorphisms, good grooming, pleasant expression, youthfulness, companionship, mate selection, similarity, social intimacy, and a warm personality. Averageness is when a face is low in distinctiveness. Sexual dimorphisms are how masculine or feminine a face looks, for example, males having a square jaw and thick brows and females having high cheekbones and fuller lips. These are all components that are taken into consideration when defining attractiveness.

Whether you realize it or not, attractiveness affects your everyday life. Everyone is attracted to someone. Everyone is also affected by attractiveness and how it relates individually to everyone and everything.

Literature Review

A review of the literature suggests that there are many factors and correlations between variables that account for physical attractiveness in college students. There are several different components to consider when thinking and evaluating attractiveness such as: what are the qualities to being attractive; the influences of media on attractiveness; and the effect of self-esteem on who you are attracted to and who is attracted to you.

According to researchers, there are several components that contribute to attractiveness including averageness, symmetry, sexual dimorphism, good grooming, a pleasant expression, youthfulness, and, for known faces, reflections of nonphysical characteristics, such as how much one likes the person^{2, 3, 4, 5, 6}. Danel and Pawlowski⁷ also put great emphasis on sexual dimorphic traits such as masculine/feminine characteristics. Several other aspects including companionship, mate selection, reciprocity, recreation, romantic relations, sexual activity, similarity, social intimacy, social skills, and a warm personality also led to factors that make people more physically attractive^{1, 8}.

Researchers agree that attractiveness is based partly on physiological activity in the brain. Attractive faces and people activate the reward centers in the brain and also motivate sexual behavior^{2, 8, 9, 10, 11}. Another factor involves hormones that are released in the brain when you are attracted to someone^{12, 13}. Attractiveness can bring rise to several emotions but pleasure must always be one¹¹. Sexual behavior utilizes positive feedback by enhancing motivation.

There have been several developmental research studies suggesting that infants prefer an attractive face over an unattractive face. This preference could be an innate quality that everyone is born with or that has been learned very early in life^{9, 14, 11}. Researchers have found that not only adults but also infants gaze in the direction of something or someone that they find interesting^{15, 13, 11, 6}. Toates⁸ suggests that people are not simply passive until triggered by external incentives such as having someone attractive to look at. Developmental studies have shown that not only adults but also infants prefer to look at more attractive faces because they are more highly motivating and interesting to gaze at.

Media is also an influencing component that affects how we feel about our own body images, who we should be attracted to, and also is a model of how we think others and ourselves

should appear. People often compare themselves with others in their daily lives therefore we have a tendency to make comparisons with the people we see in magazines, in commercials and in television/movies^{16, 17, 18, 19}. Because media presents the ideal woman as having a thin body, adoption of this reality may lead to a decrease in a woman's body satisfaction²⁰. Generally more research has been conducted on how media affects women's view on self esteem, body image and attractiveness but men are also reasonably just as concerned. Though women are usually more concerned with body fat, men are concerned about body fat and their level of muscularity^{21, 22, 23, 24, 25}. The exposure to media images of lean muscular men may be contributing and causing some men to feel depressed, dissatisfied, and unable to achieve a muscular ideal²⁶. Media has a powerful influence on not only females' but also males' perceptions of a false reality of body image and satisfaction. Ideal media figures can lead to dissatisfaction and negative feelings towards one's own body image. Discontent with one's body image can lead to anorexia, bulimia, obsessive dieting or exercising, and depression.

How attractive you feel and your self-esteem are closely related to how and who you are attracted to. Researchers^{27, 8, 28, 29, 24} suggest that attractive people date other attractive people. Whether you are an attractive person who is attracted to another attractive person, or you have the same similarities, the common phrase that "likes attract likes" is proven to be true.

Methodology

In a small liberal arts university, the University of Montevallo, a convenience sample of students attending classes in May Term and Summer I was taken. Students in the study were taking courses at the introduction level to upper level courses. Participants were from first year through graduate level. Students were asked to complete a 33 item survey on attractiveness and their attitudes of the affect of attractiveness in their lives. A total of 120 participants completed the survey. Thirty one males from ages 18-39 and 89 females ages 17-55 participated. The wide variety of students with differing age, height, weight, sexual orientation and class standings were a good indicator as a representation of the entire school's population. Married students made up 13 percent of participants. The data was analyzed in several Excel spreadsheets to determine if there was a significant relationship between the independent and dependent variables.

The independent variables were questions based on relationships, characteristics, self-esteem, and media. Relationship questions asked to what extent does your job, friends, mother, father, siblings, and spouse (if applicable) support your view of yourself as attractive (questions 61-66). Characteristic questions dealt with how important different measures are for maintaining attractiveness (questions 23-32). Self-esteem questions asked when you look in the mirror, does it affect your mood and do you think about how others evaluate your looks and does that affect your mood? (questions 46-48). Media questions asked how often does media play a role in your life (questions 85-88). The dependent variable focused on how a person feels about their overall personal attractiveness. Questions for the dependent variable asked how satisfied are you about overall facial attractiveness, general muscle tone, body weight, overall appearance dressed and undressed (questions 41-45).

Four different hypotheses were formulated to find the outcome of a person's overall attractiveness. The relationship hypothesis states that attractiveness is not important when it comes to friends, family, and job. The characteristic hypothesis states that maintaining attractiveness by means of different measures is important. The self-esteem hypothesis states that maintaining a positive self-esteem affects personal attractiveness. Finally, the media hypothesis states that media plays a role in evaluating our own personal attractiveness. Each hypothesis relates to each of the four components and their relating questions.

Results

The relationship questions 61-66 showed that there was not a significant relationship between the independent and dependent variable as shown in Table 1. This means that our perceptions do not seem to affect our relationships with others around us.

The characteristic questions 23-32 showed that there was not a significant relationship between the independent and dependent variable as shown in Table 2. This means that our perceptions do not seem to affect measures of characteristics that we have for ourselves.

The self-esteem questions 46-48 showed that there was a marginally significant relationship between the independent and dependent variable as shown in Table 3. This means that our perceptions do seem to affect our self-esteem.

The media questions 85-88 showed that there was a strong significant relationship between the independent and dependent variable as shown in Table 4. Most of the significance came from question 86. This means that our perceptions do seem to be influenced by media.

Findings indicate that there seems to be a strong significance between media and overall self attractiveness. There also seems to be a marginally significance between self-esteem and overall self attractiveness.

Discussion

Marketing and advertising can learn that showing unrealistic men and women in commercials and magazines will not sell as much as marketing realistic figures that people can identify with, to promote healthy attractiveness. By learning that the models that we see in media are not good representations of “normal” body weight and height, individuals can be happier with their bodies. Should I have an opportunity to continue my research, it would be interesting to show pictures of different body images to participants. A larger pool of participants should also be surveyed.

Limitations

A convenience sample of college students attending courses at the University of Montevallo during May and Summer 1 term was taken. Access to participants was by permission of the faculty instructor. It is possible that the participants in the study who take classes in May and Summer 1 may not fully reflect the University of Montevallo student population. It is also possible that faculty who agreed to allow class time for surveying may have influenced the participant pool and survey outcomes.

The survey also relied heavily upon self-report by the participants. Given the content of the questionnaire, self-reporting could have affected subjects' truthfulness in reporting accurately. The male population at the University of Montevallo was limited during the May and Summer 1 terms. The University of Montevallo male to female ratio is 40 to 60; male representation in the survey was close to 30%. Since the University of Montevallo only has about 3,000 students and only 120 students participated in the survey, the validity and reliability of the survey should be tested on a larger population.

Table 1								
<i>Regression Statistics</i>								
Multiple R	0.175753							
R Square	0.030889							
Adjusted R Square	-0.0144							
Standard Error	4.447283							
Observations	113							
ANOVA								
	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>			
Regression	5	67.45348	13.4907	0.682095	0.63797			
Residual	107	2116.281	19.77833					
Total	112	2183.735						
	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Lower 95%</i>	<i>Upper 95%</i>	<i>Lower 95.0%</i>	<i>Upper 95.0%</i>
Intercept	12.97278	1.551978	8.358873	2.54E-13	9.89617	16.0494	9.89617	16.0494
Q62	0.370816	0.403309	0.919435	0.359936	-0.4287	1.170329	-0.4287	1.170329
Q63	-0.07844	0.402254	-0.195	0.845759	-0.87586	0.718979	-0.87586	0.718979
Q64	-0.21824	0.36785	-0.59328	0.554248	-0.94746	0.510983	-0.94746	0.510983
Q65	0.442168	0.372689	1.186427	0.238081	-0.29664	1.180981	-0.29664	1.180981
Q66	-0.53569	0.396562	-1.35083	0.179599	-1.32183	0.25045	-1.32183	0.25045

Table 2								
<i>Regression Statistics</i>								
Multiple R	0.242504							
R Square	0.058808							
Adjusted R Square	-0.02834							
Standard Error	4.441041							
Observations	119							
ANOVA								
	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>			
Regression	10	133.0925	13.30925	0.674814	0.745597			

Residual	108	2130.067	19.72284					
Total	118	2263.16						
	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Lower 95%</i>	<i>Upper 95%</i>	<i>Lower 95.0%</i>	<i>Upper 95.0%</i>
Intercept	10.22342	3.517714	2.906267	0.004439	3.250697	17.19614	3.250697	17.19614
Q23	0.174108	0.565316	0.307984	0.758688	-0.94645	1.294664	-0.94645	1.294664
Q24	0.899462	0.515693	1.744182	0.083973	-0.12273	1.921654	-0.12273	1.921654
Q25	-0.26422	0.560025	-0.4718	0.638024	-1.37428	0.845849	-1.37428	0.845849
Q26	0.144302	0.40361	0.357529	0.721394	-0.65572	0.944328	-0.65572	0.944328
Q27	-0.14952	0.395949	-0.37762	0.706452	-0.93436	0.63532	-0.93436	0.63532
Q28	0.012364	0.51898	0.023824	0.981037	-1.01634	1.041072	-1.01634	1.041072
Q29	0.000374	0.547968	0.000683	0.999457	-1.08579	1.086541	-1.08579	1.086541
Q30	0.455805	0.458528	0.994061	0.322415	-0.45308	1.364688	-0.45308	1.364688
Q31	-0.56192	0.463168	-1.2132	0.2277	-1.48	0.356164	-1.48	0.356164
Q32	0.32966	0.653881	0.504158	0.615177	-0.96645	1.625766	-0.96645	1.625766

Table 3								
<i>Regression Statistics</i>								
Multiple R	0.211941							
R Square	0.044919							
Adjusted R Square	0.020218							
Standard Error	4.317462							
Observations	120							
ANOVA								
	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>			
Regression	3	101.6958	33.8986	1.818548	0.147634			
Residual	116	2162.296	18.64048					
Total	119	2263.992						
	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Lower 95%</i>	<i>Upper 95%</i>	<i>Lower 95.0%</i>	<i>Upper 95.0%</i>
Intercept	16.46482	1.536756	10.71401	4.88E-19	13.42108	19.50856	13.42108	19.50856
Q46	-0.58885	0.511929	-1.15026	0.252402	-1.60279	0.425087	-1.60279	0.425087
Q47	0.126301	0.593965	0.212641	0.83198	-1.05012	1.302724	-1.05012	1.302724
Q48	-0.55168	0.559075	-0.98678	0.325805	-1.659	0.555635	-1.659	0.555635

Table 4								
<i>Regression Statistics</i>								
Multiple R	0.38459							
R Square	0.14791							
Adjusted R Square	0.118272							
Standard Error	4.09573							
Observations	120							
ANOVA								
	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>			
Regression	4	334.8663	83.71659	4.990556	0.000957			
Residual	115	1929.125	16.775					
Total	119	2263.992						
	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Lower 95%</i>	<i>Upper 95%</i>	<i>Lower 95.0%</i>	<i>Upper 95.0%</i>
Intercept	15.00219	1.569548	9.55829	2.77E-16	11.89322	18.11116	11.89322	18.11116
Q85	0.461588	0.512567	0.900543	0.369713	-0.55371	1.476885	-0.55371	1.476885
Q86	1.30229	0.568955	2.288917	0.02391	0.1753	2.429279	0.1753	2.429279
Q87	-0.2009	0.541982	-0.37067	0.711563	-1.27446	0.872664	-1.27446	0.872664
Q88	-1.95703	0.460632	-4.24858	4.39E-05	-2.86945	-1.04461	-2.86945	-1.04461

Endnotes

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