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Self-Rated Physical Attractiveness, Attractiveness Standards, and Expectation Deviations in Romantic Partners Among Non-Married University Students

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Self-Rated Physical Attractiveness, Attractiveness Standards, and Expectation Deviations in Romantic Partners Among Non-Married University Students

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Abstract: This study surveyed unmarried, randomly selected university students to discover how they rated themselves regarding physical attractiveness, what range of attractiveness they would consider in a romantic partner, and what would cause them to deviate from this range. The results showed that the most frequently chosen rating for self-attractiveness was a 7 (on a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the most attractive) for both men and women. A t-test showed that men had a slightly higher mean of rating than women in their own level of attractiveness, though these results were not statistically significant. When asked for a range of attractiveness that respondents were willing to consider in a dating partner, the most frequently chosen number for the lowest level was 7. For the highest level of attractiveness in their range, about half of the participants selected 10. A t-test revealed that women had a slightly lower mean for the low end of the range of attractiveness they were willing to accept in a dating partner than males, which was statistically significant. Another t-test, though not statistically significant, revealed that men had a slightly higher mean in the high range of attractiveness they were willing to accept in a dating partner than women. Perhaps the most interesting finding was that not only were both genders willing to deviate from their standard of attractiveness in a dating partner (given the right circumstances), but women were much more likely to deviate than men.

When people are looking for a potential life partner, many factors are taken into consideration. Physical attractiveness is generally thought to be a significant criterion in this process. Single college students constitute a demographic that is often believed to be eagerly seeking a potential mate. So how does physical attractiveness play a role in the mate selection process among university students? Is there a relationship between one's own perceived attractiveness level and attractiveness expectations in others? An examination of the rating of one's own attractiveness level and the range of acceptability of a potential mate could illuminate our understanding of this selection process.

According to the social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), people first get to know each other on a surface, superficial level. Physical attractiveness is one of these superficial qualities. This theory suggests that as you get to know a person better, your relationship becomes based on inner qualities instead of external factors.

Research shows that college students on blind dates are more likely to enjoy the date if they have a similar level of attractiveness as their date. However, when couples are mismatched, the less attractive partner is happy with the date because of how attractive their date is, while the more attractive person will be dissatisfied because their date is less attractive than their expectations (Feingold, 1990). Individuals who feel ashamed that their appearance does not meet cultural standards are more conscious of physical attractiveness levels than those who are self-confident (Sanchez, Good, Kwang, & Saltzman, 2008).

Another study found that the less involved the relationship level, the lower the standard for any characteristic in a mate, including physical attractiveness (Buunk, Dijkstra, Fetchenhauer, & Kenrick, 2002). Also, how closely couples match in attractiveness predicts longevity of a relationship. Married couples are more likely to have similar levels of attractiveness than casually dating couples (Feingold, 1988). However, attractiveness is not the only factor that goes into mate selection. One study uses a term called “market value” to represent a person’s attractiveness, personality, and resources. According to the study, people with similar market values will end up together (Kenrick, Groth, Trost, & Sadalla, 1993).

The range of acceptable attractiveness may differ in importance between men and women. One study shows that women underemphasize the importance of attractiveness in a dating relationship (Hadjistavropoulos & Genest, 1994). Therefore, a specific question about what range of attractiveness would be acceptable could provide further insight into this difference.

For men, attractiveness is a primary criterion for choosing a mate. Though attractiveness is important to both genders, women consider it a secondary factor in mate selection. Women look for status and resources first and then make decisions based on physical attractiveness (Li, Kendrick, Bailey & Linsenmeier, 2002). However, women who are not seeking a long-term mate but rather a short-term relationship are more interested in physical attractiveness than status (Li & Kenrick, 2006). Another study showed that even in online relationships, attractiveness is more important to men than it is to women (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009).

Once couples are in a serious relationship, both genders perceive other members of the opposite sex as less attractive. Couples who are committed to another person have “blindness” on that keep them from being attracted to others of the opposite gender (Simpson, Gangestad, & Lerma, 1990).

A person’s level of desperation for a relationship also factors into how important physical attractiveness is to them. One study showed that after 51 failed dates, a person

would accept any level of physical attractiveness (Kailick & Hamilton, 1986).

A factor that creates a deviation from the importance of physical attractiveness is romantic interest. Even if two people state that a high level of attractiveness is important to them, they will deviate from their standard if they are romantically interested in a person (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008). The social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) suggests that the more you get to know someone, the more the inner qualities will matter. This implies deviation from attractiveness standards might occur if people become better acquainted.

Research Questions

1. How do single college students rate their own physical attractiveness?
2. What range of attractiveness levels are single college students willing to consider in a dating partner?
3. What circumstances would allow for single college students to deviate from this range?

Method

Participants

A survey was created and distributed via e-mail to 397 randomly chosen male and female students from a small, private, faith-based university's student directory. The participants were chosen through random systematic sampling, with every fourth person being chosen. The sample included freshman through senior classes.

Procedure

An online survey was created on Zoomerang and participants were able to access the survey via a link in the e-mail that was sent. The e-mail stated that participants' responses would be kept anonymous and briefly explained the purpose of the survey. Participants were given a week to complete the survey; at the end of the week, the survey was closed on Zoomerang. Of the 397 individuals invited to participate in the study, 251 responded. Nine participants were married or under the age of 18 and had to be removed from the study, resulting in a total of 242 students.

Measure

The survey asked participants to check the boxes that pertained to them regarding gender, age, class standing, and whether they were single or married. It was important to include the question regarding relationship status in order to specifically filter out any married participants since this study focused on the unmarried segment of the student population.

Following the demographic questions, participants were asked for information regarding the levels of attractiveness in a partner. The following are the questions that

were given on the Zoomerang survey:

- Rate what you perceive to be your own level of attractiveness on a scale from 1 – 10 (1 being extremely unattractive, 10 being extremely attractive.)
- On a scale from 1 – 10 (1 being extremely unattractive, 10 being extremely attractive), what is the range of attractiveness that you would consider in a potential mate? Please provide two numbers to indicate the range.
- In what circumstances would you consider dating someone outside of your attractiveness standard range? Please type your answer below and limit your answer to 100 words.

After obtaining the results from the survey, the data were placed in SPSS in order to analyze the results.

Results

Of the 242 participants included in this analysis, 103 (42%) were men and 139 (57%) were women. While this study does not include differences among class standing levels, a fairly even distribution of freshman through senior classes were represented. All included participants were single.

This analysis focused on responses as a whole and a comparison of responses by gender. A frequency test showed that about one-third ($n=78$) of the 242 students, both men and women, rated themselves a 7 on their own level of attractiveness. This score was the most frequently chosen rating for self-perceived attractiveness. The results of a t-test showed that men had a slightly higher self-rating mean than women (male mean = 6.70, female mean = 6.63), but this difference was not statistically significant ($p = 0.680$).

Participants were asked to indicate the range of attractiveness levels that they would consider in a potential mate. The findings revealed that the most frequently chosen low number for the attractiveness range was 7. About one-fourth ($n=59$) of the 242 participants chose 7 as the low end of their range. Also, just more than half ($n=125$) of the 242 participants chose 10 (“extremely attractive”) as the highest number in attractiveness that would be considered for a dating partner, making this score the most frequently chosen response. (See Tables 1 and 2 in the appendix.)

When looking at the differences between men and women in response to this same question, a t-test revealed that the female participants showed a lower mean than the male participants in regards to the low end of the range of acceptability in a dating partner (female mean = 5.80, male mean = 6.21). This result was significant at $p < 0.10$ ($p = 0.084$). Another t-test showed that men had a higher mean for the high end of the range than women (male mean = 9.10, female mean = 8.88). This difference was not statistically significant ($p = 0.192$).

While SPSS was used to analyze survey results for the first two research questions,

coding was utilized to analyze the results for the third research question. The written responses from the participants were thoroughly read and coded using an inductive approach. Response categories that emerged from the coded data included personality (which required mention of the word “personality” or words describing personality such as “fun” or “outgoing”), character/values (which required mention of words describing character such as “kind,” “caring,” or “thoughtful”), life purpose/goals (which required mention of words describing a life purpose or goals such as “driven” or “motivated”), spirituality (which required mention of the word “spiritual” or the word “God”), and “the one” (which required mention that deviation would occur for the person the participant viewed as “the one” they were going to marry). All responses to this question that did not fit into one of these categories were labeled “other.”

In response to the survey question on possible reasons to deviate from the preferred range of attractiveness, the majority (n=155) of both men and women answered that they would deviate from their ideal range of attractiveness in a dating partner if the partner possessed a great personality. Of the 155 “personality preferred” responses, 62 were men and 93 were women. Character and values was the second most popular reason to deviate from the participants’ desired level of attractiveness in a dating partner. The responses for this category totaled 58 — 11 men and 47 women. The third most frequently stated reason for deviation was spirituality with 34 responses — nine men and 25 women. Life purpose or goals was the fourth most stated deviation. The total responses for this category were eight -- four men and four women. Finally, there were six responses — four men and two women – for the category “the one.” In addition to these response categories, there were 57 “other” responses.

Discussion

The results of this analysis reinforce the idea that men are more visually driven and put a higher priority on physical attractiveness than women, as found in the studies by Li, Kendrick, Bailey, and Linsenmeier (2002) and Hadjistavropoulos and Genest (1994).

Using social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), we generally expected single college students to be more superficial in desired qualities in a dating partner than individuals in a committed relationship. We further hypothesized that men would display this mentality more than women. These expectations were met with the results of this study. Although not statistically significant, the means of men were higher in both the low and high range levels of expected attractiveness in a dating partner, suggesting that men may place a higher importance on physical attractiveness than women.

Additionally the mean score for men was found to be higher on the self-rate physical attractiveness scale. Interestingly, male participants also often expected their dating partner to be in a range higher than their own self-rating, further validating the idea of the priority placed on physical attractiveness by men.

Previous research (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008) suggested that although there is a certain sense of superficiality among single individuals, deviation from a high standard of physical attractiveness will occur under certain circumstances. This study confirmed this idea, with most participants reporting at least one attribute that would cause them to deviate from their usual standard of attractiveness in a dating partner. In addition, this analysis showed that women were more likely to deviate from their physical attractiveness standard than men. In three of the five deviation categories found in this study (“personality,” “character,” and “spirituality”), women were more likely to report these deviations. This further illustrates the importance men place on physical attractiveness by not deviating from their standard.

Since participants were students at a faith-based university, it is interesting but not surprising to note the number of women who reported the importance of character/values and spirituality in a potential mate. As a deviation, women named character/values four times more than men and spirituality nearly three times more than men.

In some instances, male participants were emphatic about the importance they place on physical attractiveness and their unwillingness to deviate from their acceptable standard. Some examples of verbatim male responses received for the final question of the survey (“In what circumstances would you consider dating someone outside of your attractiveness standard range?”) include the following:

“Oh baby, she better be good lookin’ my friend or she ain’t worth the cookin’.” *Male, respondent #41*

“NEVER!!!” *Male, respondent #135*

“Pretty much none. Maybe if we were the last two people on earth.”
Male, respondent #125

“If I was in a horrible accident and my face and body were terribly disfigured, then I would consider it.” *Male, respondent #179*

On the other hand, a number of women stressed that non-surface characteristics would encourage deviation from their standard. Some examples of female responses received for the final question of the survey include the following:

“Not only do they have to be attractive, but they have to have a great personality. Usually hot guys have a huge ego.” *Female, respondent #2*

“Most people that are above a 7 tend to know it and be conceited. If he wasn’t conceited, I’d be able to date him.” *Female, respondent #44*

“If the man were to not be attractive, but have a very good heart and be good to me then attractiveness wouldn’t matter.” *Female, respondent #93*

While this study was a fair representation of the university student body (nearly 10% of the student population participated in the survey), there are some limitations in this study. The university from which the study sample was taken has a slightly higher population of female students than male students. This raises the question of whether women feel they can be as “picky” as they would like since men are a minority of the student population. This fact may be reflected in their responses. Another limitation is that the participants were only given two choices (single or married) for their relationship status. Therefore it is not known if those in a serious dating relationship would answer differently than their non-dating counterparts.

This study offered a fascinating look into the standards single college students place on potential dating partners. The results from this study could be used to delve further into the minds of this demographic. One study could examine how results would differ based on relationship level. Researchers could give the same survey to individuals of single status, dating status, engaged status, and married status and compare the results to those of this study. That study would offer an opportunity to see if there is a correlation between increased level of relationship commitment and decreased standard of physical attractiveness. Another area of potential study is to see the extent to which the importance placed on physical attractiveness differs by ethnicity.

This study adds to the research base of interpersonal relationships and more specifically mate selection criteria. Although it is not a surprise that physical attractiveness plays a significant role in this selection process, looking at gender differences helps us understand the levels of importance men versus women place on different desired criteria.

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Table 1**Rating of Low End of Range of Acceptability in Potential Dating Partner**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Extremely Unattractive	11	4.5	4.6	4.6
3	9	3.7	3.8	8.3
4	19	7.9	7.9	16.3
5	51	21.1	21.3	37.5
6	47	19.4	19.6	57.1
7	59	24.4	24.6	81.7
8	30	12.4	12.5	94.2
8.50	1	0.4	0.4	94.6
9	9	3.7	3.8	98.3
Extremely Attractive	4	1.7	1.7	100.0
Total	240	99.2	100.0	
Missing	2	0.8		
Total	242	100.0		

Table 2**Rating of High End of Range of Acceptability in Potential Dating Partner**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
5	5	2.1	2.1	2.1
6	6	2.5	2.5	4.6
7	23	9.5	9.6	14.2
8	48	19.8	20.0	34.2
9	33	13.6	13.8	47.9
Extremely Attractive	125	51.7	52.1	100.0
Total	240	99.2	100.0	
Missing	2	0.8		
Total	242	100.0		