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Our face allows us to convey our every thought and feeling with those around us in a nearly instantaneous manner. Without our face, we would be stuck in an emotionless and depressing self-existence devoid of a primary vehicle of communication. As social beings, it is in our very nature to share our expressions with the outside world. It is likewise in our nature to subconsciously judge each face, assigning certain traits to particular facial characteristics. One of the most important characteristics that we judge is “beauty.” Interestingly, there is an unusually consistent agreement of what is considered “beautiful” amongst different cultures, but only when we are referring to the face rather than the body, a topic that will be explored herein.

BEAUTY OF THE BODY

So what is it that makes a person “beautiful”? Beauty is an arbitrary and abstract concept that is seemingly difficult, if not impossible to define. Considering the vast diversity in this world and the countless cultures it contains, one would expect that surely there must be different culturally dependent standards of beauty. However, research suggests that this is only partially correct.

Research examining the physical attractiveness of the female body often uses the waist-to-hip ratio (WHR) as a quantifiable measure. Indeed, studies have found that males from most cultures and across history strongly prefer female figures with a low WHR. In the developed world, healthy females have higher levels of estrogen that cause more fat to be deposited on the buttocks and hips rather than on the waist, leading to a low WHR. Thus, the WHR is an indicator of health status and fertility, and male preference for low-WHR females is considered an excellent example of male assessment of mate quality.

Despite the overall preference of men for women with a low WHR, variations do exist, thereby casting doubt on the theory that this may be a universal ideal. Another measure of body habitus is the body mass index (BMI), which is a heuristic proxy for human body fat. Different cultures and populations prefer females of different BMI and WHR due to different sociocultural influences. Undeniably, the effect of “Westernization” may be contributing to a more universal standard of beauty, but this is not due to our innate evolutionary preferences. Regardless of these influences, a study comparing female physical attractiveness between Japanese and British participants found that Japanese men preferred images of woman with significantly lower BMIs than Britons and likewise were more reliant on body shape when judging physical attractiveness.

However, the flaw with these studies in general is that every culture tested so far has been exposed to the potentially confounding influence of Western media. A landmark study by Yu and Shepard assessed the WHR preferences of a culturally isolated population of Matsigenka indigenous people in Peru, who are located in an extensive nature park where access is restricted solely to scientific and official visitors and the vast majority of natives have never left the premises. Their results showed that the WHR preferences of males of this tribe differed strikingly from those of the United States control population as well as from other world cultures, with the “over-weight” female ranking highest in the factors of attractiveness, healthiness, and preferred spouse.

These were critical findings as they differed strikingly from the preferences of males in other cultures. The authors suggest that this difference may be due to the fact that in traditional societies, physical features may play a lesser role because mate choice is limited by kinship rules, and potential mates have access to direct information about mate quality, such as age and history of illness. As a result, they do not rely primarily on information inferred from physical appearance. In contrast, in industrialized societies, daily exposure to strangers from an early age may increase the importance of using physical features to assess potential mates based on these factors.

FACIAL BEAUTY

It seems reasonable to question whether these relative cultural norms likewise influence our perception of facial beauty. Counterintuitively, the answer is no. Before exploring this topic, we must first consider what exactly facial beauty is and how to define it. The quest to find a suitable definition of facial beauty dates back to antiquity, when the ancient Greeks believed that beauty appeared when the ratio of many different facial features to each other approached the value 1:1.618, the so-called golden ratio. However, things are not so simple, as further research has shown that facial beauty is more a combination of symmetry and an ideal harmony of the facial features with each other. And most importantly, as humans we have an innate mechanism for detecting this elusive concept of beauty.

Symmetry is an important aspect of facial beauty and is tied to evolutionary fitness, where left-right bilateral symmetry describes health and high genetic quality, and deviations from it may indicate poor qualities and therefore form a basis for rejection of a potential mate.

There are several examples that seem to reinforce this concept. For instance, supermodels, arguably considered the most attractive members of Western society, have the least degree of facial asymmetry when compared to the general population. Facial asymmetry exists along a gradient in our population and it is clear that we have evolved to tolerate some degree of this asymmetry. Interestingly, studies have shown that averaging a random group of faces results in a synthetic face more attractive than any of the original faces. The faces used in these analyses consisted of thirty-two completely random faces from a pool of different cultures, yet...
observers always ranked the composite face as being the most attractive. Paradoxically, this suggests that the ideal harmony of the facial features that we consider to be “beautiful” is actually as close to “average” as possible. Naturally, such statements have drawn criticism from many individuals who refuse to believe that beauty may in any way related to “averageness”.

It is critical to note that the computational “average” of facial features that is considered attractive in this case is completely distinct from what culture commonly refers to as an “average” face, which naturally has a negative connotation and is not considered “beautiful”. There are certainly unique and interesting features that may add to the perceived attractiveness of an individual’s face, but it is important to realize that they must be associated with an “average” face and must be harmonious with the other facial features.

There have been arguments that beauty is a cultural phenomenon engrained in us repeatedly throughout our youth, resulting in a biased preference such as that of male for females with a low WHR ratio. However, there are many examples that disprove this theory. Eleven separate meta-analyses have revealed very high agreement in facial-attractiveness ratings by raters both within their own culture, and across other cultures. In fact, the effect sizes were more than double the size necessary to be considered large and thereby strongly suggest a universal standard by which facial attractiveness is judged.

In order to negate the possible influence of Western media, a study examining preferences for facial symmetry between British individuals and the Hadza, a hunter-gatherer society of Tanzania, likewise found that facial symmetry was more attractive than asymmetry across both cultures. These findings further question the assumption that ratings of facial attractiveness and ideals of facial “beauty” are culturally unique and are consistent with the fact that young infants prefer to look at faces that adults likewise consider to be attractive.

It is important to realize that there are exogenous factors that augment attractiveness and beauty as it pertains to mate selection, which is precisely why it is such an elusive concept to define. Dutton argues that based on Darwinian aesthetics, individuals consciously select mates who have certain characteristics, and that such characteristics in fact may make the person more attractive and “beautiful” to them. Dutton further states that it is human personality that adds another dimension of beauty, with traits such as a delightful sense of humor and generosity being attractive. Although it is still evolutionarily based on finding a healthy mate who is able to provide care, it is this rational intention combined with physical appearance that forms a complete view of beauty and attractiveness.

CONCLUSION

Beauty is an elusive concept that is envied and sought by many, yet is extremely difficult to define. Although the beauty of the body has an evolutionary basis, the concept of the ideal body is a cultural construct that has been influenced and continues to be influenced by culture and media. Conversely, facial beauty is a biologically ingrained concept based on symmetry and an ideal coalescence of that facial features with each other that transcend barriers of culture, media, and time. Ultimately, concepts of beauty and attractiveness are evolutionarily based, but cannot be looked at narrowly as based solely on appearance as they are augmented by exogenous factors.

REFERENCES