

The Origins of Attraction

“If she ain’t got booty, she ain’t getting Ryan.” This colorful statement, extracted from an interview conducted during my research, is an example of one of many physical traits that a male of college age might prefer in a female. In my ethnographic research, I surveyed four heterosexual men and three heterosexual women of ages 18-24, and inquired about the ideal physical traits they desire in a potential partner. After a thorough examination of their various physical preferences, the question I sought to answer concerned the *origins* of these partialities: What did these preferences mean to the individuals, and where might they have come from? After interviewing my seven participants, I have concluded that the media has a substantial influence over the physical traits that my male informants considered attractive in women, while my female informants were markedly less susceptible to the influence of the media and were more likely to develop their physical preferences from experiences with males in their childhood.

MEDIA INFLUENCE IN MALE INTERVIEWS

For each interview, I asked the participant to close their eyes and describe their “perfect” man or woman from head to toe. I then asked them to provide me with three celebrities they found attractive, to see if any connections could be drawn between their image of an ideal partner and the celebrities they listed. Nolan, my first male participant, described his ideal woman as having tan skin, a flat stomach, slender arms, tight buttocks, and long, toned legs. The first attractive celebrity he provided was Jennifer Aniston, whose physical appearance visibly correlated with his “ideal woman” description. The next question I asked my participants was which physical traits of the ones they had provided me with were most important to them. Nolan replied that a woman having long, toned legs was most important because to him, it was the strongest indicator of physical fitness. He explained

that physical fitness was an essential quality in a potential partner because he is a runner and therefore very physically active, and he desires a woman who occupies a similarly active lifestyle. To conclude the interviews, I attempted to unveil any possible influences of the media in my participants' choices by asking them for examples in the media where they might observe their ideal man or woman. Nolan's answer came quickly, explaining that he had first fallen for Jennifer Aniston as Rachel in *Friends* in 3rd grade. "She wore heels a lot, and had the toned legs," he explained, grinning. Therefore, the development of Nolan's preference for toned legs, and possibly his entire image of the "ideal woman" he had described at the beginning of the interview, could be traced back to his adolescent crush on a popular TV character. When prompted where he personally believed his physical preferences for woman had originated from, he validated my theory by replying, "It grew from TV. And my feelings for Jennifer Aniston haven't changed!" This was the first example among my participants where a source of media—in this case, an actress in a television show—exerted considerable influence over the physical traits that an individual found attractive in the opposite sex.

Jake, my second male participant, began his interview by describing a girl that was remarkably different from Nolan's ideal, physically fit woman. Jake's girl was all-around a little "meatier," with him preferring a little "chunk" to his girls in their torsos, hips, legs, and buttocks. He explained that the physical feature he considered most important was "a little meat on the bones," because it signifies to him that she isn't so concerned with her appearance to be extremely "stacked" or "super skinny," but cares enough about the way she looks to still appear attractive and healthy. Near the end of Jake's interview, it became clear that Nolan was not alone in his fixation on a character in a TV show. The first attractive celebrity that Jake named was Mandy Moore; when asked about examples in the media where he might see his ideal woman, he specifically mentioned Moore's role of Julie Quinn on the TV show *Scrubs*. "Her character was what I liked - There was something accessible about her; she wasn't perfect." Jake explained that to him, "accessibility" meant being approachable – Mainly, a girl that wasn't so attractive or fit that he would be intimidated to approach

her or strike up a conversation. He explained that he didn't want high standards in a relationship, and believed his physical preferences for women mainly originated from the simple desire to find someone who fit into his lifestyle; he worked out, but not religiously, so he wanted someone who had a similar routine. All things considered, Jake made it clear that he didn't expect nor want perfection, even in his "ideal" woman. Though the influence of the media on Jake's preferences was a bit subtler than in Nolan's case, the accessibility and "non-perfection" of Moore's character in *Scrubs* continues to be a reflection of the type of girl that Jake prefers today.

Ryan, my third male participant, was observably the most influenced by the media in his interview. Ryan's ideal woman had long, blonde hair, tan skin, full breasts, "grab-able" buttocks, and straight, white teeth. The first attractive celebrity he named, Carrie Underwood, perfectly embodied these traits. He explained that his penchant for blonde hair was because it was the "pinnacle of cuteness in the American girl," and that Carrie Underwood was arguably the "perfect American woman." The most important trait for him, however, was the "juicy booty," as referenced by his imaginative quote in the introduction. Ryan mentioned that he thought it was possible that his penchant for a woman with fuller buttocks and breasts might be evolutionary in nature, as these traits might, according to Ryan, "encourage mating." The evolution of large breasts and shapely bodies in humans is a topic covered in Frances E. Mascia-Lees' textbook *Gender & Difference in a Globalizing World*. In Chapter Five, "The Evolution of Gender and Difference," a question is posed: "Did the "nice breasts" of some females or the shapely bodies of others form the basis of human pair-bonding in our evolutionary past?" (Mascia-Lees 118) According to Lees, many sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists argue that hominid males became attracted to "chesty" females as sexual partners more so than less-endowed females, which resulted in the preservation of this trait in modern human populations. Similar to what Ryan is implying, these individuals argue that sexual selection best explains why human women have permanently enlarged breasts. However, Mascia-Lees, John Relethford, and Tim Sorger disagree, reasoning that the evolution of permanently

enlarged breasts is more likely to relate to natural selection, not sexual selection. These professionals argue that fat storage was a crucial element that contributed to the selective advantage of enlarged breasts; females who were able to store fat were more likely to survive by converting fat to energy in times of food scarcity in order to nurse their young. Thus, instead of large breasts being a trait that evolved because of a male preference, they argue that large, full breasts were merely coincidental by-products in the natural selection process for fat. This idea of fat storage serving a survival purpose can also relate to the “juicy booty” Ryan is attracted to in women – Though perhaps evolutionary in the fact that the ability to store extra fat carries a survival value, large breasts or buttocks do not seem to have developed from any sexual preferences males may have had for “juicier” females. Another interesting facet to Ryan’s description of his ideal woman was his specification of the “grab-able” buttocks. This idea of grabbing a woman by her buttocks relates to the discourses of mind/body dualism that Lees discusses in Chapter Nine, “Embodying Politics.” Lees explains that in Western thinking, “woman” is associated with the body, while “man” is linked with the mind. “Woman,” therefore, is not subject but object, not spirit but flesh. She is in need of control. This “grab-able” trait Ryan highlights in his ideal woman relates to these ideas, in that a woman is flesh to be grabbed, as well as the action of “grabbing” implying a certain degree of male control or dominance.

Beyond his belief in the evolutionary aspect, the “juicy booty” also signified to Ryan a “good time,” as well as implying a certain level of physical fitness. When I prompted him for examples in the media where he might find his ideal girl, he provided a multitude of examples, including the blonde, attractive anchorwomen on FOX News, the poster of model Kate Upton on the wall of his apartment, and what he called “typical” actresses in pornography. When I questioned where he believes his physical preferences originated from, he replied “Certainly the media. You need more striking things to stand out among the noise – bigger boobs, bigger butt; and it just keeps going until you get this morphed image of the idealized woman. The media constantly inundates us with this image of a woman going to extremes to show she is the best.” These media images of “women going

to extremes” are a central topic of Jean Kilbourne’s film *Killing Us Softly 4*, which presents various examples of American advertisements that sexualize & objectify women’s bodies. Kilbourne examines the “sex sells” theory, with various ads featuring nearly nude women, women at the point of orgasm, and women in suggestive positions advertising their products; the objectification of women, with ads that have turned women into beer bottles, cars, and even a floor rug; the increased incidence of Photoshop in ads, even going so far as to further adjust the waists of thin celebrities such as Jessica Alba; as well as the replacement of human intimacy with food, with fast food commercials featuring women acting as if eating the food is a pleasurable, orgasm-worthy sexual experience. With Kilbourne’s advertising examples in mind, Ryan’s assertion that the media displays women “going to extremes” is spot-on.

It was apparent from his interview that Ryan’s perception of the ideal woman was mainly, if not completely, constructed by the media’s perpetuation of the “perfect woman.” Though perhaps an extreme example, Ryan’s case represents the power of popular Western forms of media such as U.S. television, pornography, and advertisements to shape the physical traits that men grow to prefer in woman. These gender ideals, in turn, go on to shape many facets of women’s daily life experience, including the ways in which they maintain and fashion their bodies.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FEMALE BODY

The implications of these gender ideals, especially in the cases of the ideal women described by Nolan and Ryan, are inextricably embedded in the capitalist economy of the U.S. There is an entire economy built upon attaining the “ideal” female image – fashion magazines advertise makeup and clothes to improve physical appearance, the diet industry continually comes out with new books, regimens, and pills, and cosmetic surgery rates continue to soar. Lees explores the specific impact of the “Western ideal of beauty” that Ryan described among women of color in the United States, who are undergoing an increased amount of plastic surgery in what some commentators believe is an attempt to appear “whiter,” such as Asian women undergoing cosmetic surgery to alter the shape of

the eyelid to mimic the “double-lidded Western eye,” Latinas seeking lip augmentation, and black women undergoing liposuction to slenderize their shapes. Nose surgery is also popular among all of these groups (Mascia-Lees 227). Lees also explores the inundation in the United States of images of the ideal body as “slender,” which has led to extremely high rates of dieting and an increased incidence of anorexia nervosa and bulimia among recent immigrants to United States, from Korea, Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Lees explains that pursuit of the “body beautiful” is not only expensive, but time-consuming. In fact, according to Naomi Wolf, this adds a “third shift” to the two shifts women already occupy (those of professional work and of domestic work) – “Women today work three shifts: one at their job, one taking care of their home and family, and the third trying to meet the beauty demands of our culture” (Mascia-Lees 228). The practices of fashioning and maintaining the female body are deeply embedded in the United States’ social expectations for how women should appear physically (i.e.: slender, toned, etc.) as well as in its capitalist culture, which targets women with flashy ads and promises of weight loss and surgically-enhanced beauty. The body, therefore, is socially constructed by the respective physical ideals society holds for a certain gender. The body is also very much constructed by the specific economic systems that target the female consumer in order to coerce her into buying products or services meant to assist her in attaining the “ideal” female image.

INFLUENCE OF PAST MALE FIGURES IN FEMALE INTERVIEWS

When interviewing my three female participants, the influence of media in their preferences was remarkably less pronounced; however, certain male figures in their past seemed to hold considerable influence over what they now considered attractive. Carly, my first female participant, described her ideal man as tall, dark, and toned, with big hands, strong eyebrows, and a defined jawline. The celebrities she listed, which included actor James Franco, actor Channing Tatum, and soccer player Cristiano Ronaldo, were all solid representations of the ideal man she described, but unlike the cases of Nolan, Jake, and Ryan, Carly did not reference them again in her interview. Of all

the traits she described, the most important one to her was the “strong eyebrows.” Strong eyebrows on men, she explained, mean eyebrows that are thick, defined, noticeable, and low, creating a sort of “hooded eye” effect. Eyebrows of this nature symbolize masculinity and strength to Carly, as well as implying a strong personality and leadership potential. When asked for examples in the media where she might observe this ideal man, she made reference to the male models in Gucci cologne ads, who have the defined jaw and strong eyebrows she considers ideal. However, she did not consider these ads to play any part in the origins of her physical preferences for men; the origins, she believed, were found back in her childhood. Carly explained that when she was younger, one of her brother’s friends who she had a crush on had the ideal features she was describing. Additionally, her fifth grade teacher (“Mr. Harker,” she said dreamily) had the strong eyebrows, the defined jaw, the broad shoulders, and “perfect hands.” After interviewing Carly, there wasn’t much evidence to support the theory that her physical preferences for men had originated from any form of media; with her description of her brother’s friend and Mr. Harker, it appeared more likely that Carly had become fixated on certain physical male traits in her adolescence, and had carried those physical preferences into her adult life. Her mention of Gucci ads, however, is something to note; though the media and capitalist culture’s influence upon women is quite pronounced, this is not to say that men are unaffected. Mascia-Lees explores how the development of a capitalized economy also began to target the male body in addition to the female as a “new site for consumption” (Mascia-Lees 223). The implications of this targeting led to a rising dissatisfaction among men with their bodies, as well as a nearly 50 percent increase in cosmetic surgery procedures among men. Mascia-Lees writes, “The management and enhancement of the body is [sic] a gold mine for consumerism, and one whose treasures are inexhaustible, as women know” (223). Women, therefore, are not the only targets of capitalism in terms of body enhancement and beautification; men are also affected by capitalist beauty culture, though certainly to a lesser degree.

Emily, my second female informant, also had a similar early experience with a male that seemed to contribute to her modern physical preferences. Emily's ideal man was tall, broad-shouldered, with strong arms and a "big, goofy grin." Whereas other informants provided automatic answers, she spent a great deal of time trying to think of celebrities she found attractive, which led me to conclude that celebrities held very little influence in formulating her ideal man. The most important physical trait to Emily in a potential partner was the "big, goofy grin," which she considered to signify optimism and a good sense of humor. When I questioned her on where she believed her physical preferences came from, she mentioned two boys from her childhood. The first was a boyfriend who she had dated for over a year, and who had not treated her well. This individual had long hair and was scrawny, which were both traits she was no longer attracted to. She explained that after the breakup and coming to terms with the way he had mistreated her, she sat down and reflected on what kind of person she wanted to end up with, and she believes that point in time is when certain physical preferences, such as broad shoulders, tallness, and the "big, goofy grin" came to form. She explained that these physical characteristics represented nonphysical characteristics (broad shoulders and tallness representing security, the grin representing a sense of humor and optimism) that she desired for her next relationship. This is an example of an experience with a male in Emily's past contributing to the development of her current physical preferences for men. The second male, her childhood best friend Ben, occupied a more positive place in her past, and according to her, also contributed to her modern physical preferences for males. Ben had the "big goofy grin," and he was tall, with broad shoulders and strong arms, which Emily explained made him a great hugger. He was also the first boy she fell in love with, and for a large portion of her life she was told, "You're going to marry Ben," by her parents. With Ben's physical appearance being similar to the ideals that Emily still has for a partner, she explained that she believes he played a great influence in the development of her modern-day physical preferences for potential partners.

Nicole, my final female informant, was influenced by a male figure that was very different than Carly's Mr. Harkin's or Emily's Ben. Nicole's ideal man was of medium height and build, with a five o'clock shadow, neat haircut, and interesting tattoos or birthmarks. Similar to Emily, she also struggled to think of celebrities she found attractive. The most telling portion of her interview was when Nicole named facial hair as the first of her "Top 5" physical traits. She explained that her father, whom she described as an outdoorsman with a strong work ethic, was a bearded man. To her, facial hair was a representation of masculinity and a reflection of the same work ethic her father had, making it a desirable trait in a potential partner. Barnaby J. Dixson and Robert C. Brooks explore women's perceptions of beardedness in males in their study "The role of facial hair in women's perceptions of men's attractiveness, health, masculinity and parenting abilities" (Brooks and Dixson 2013). In their study, Dixson and Brooks presented photographs of men with heavy beards, heavy stubble, light stubble, and clean-shaven faces, and asked female participants to rate the subjects on attractiveness, health, masculinity, and parenting abilities. The researchers observed that masculinity ratings increased linearly as facial hair increased. Women also rated full beards highest for parenting ability and healthiness, with heavy stubble ranking the highest in attractiveness. Therefore, Nicole is not alone in her preference for facial hair; indeed, it seems to be popularly considered a representation of masculinity, as well as an indicator of a man who is both healthy and has great potential to nurture offspring. Nicole explained that she believes her physical preferences for men originated from her parents, and the values they instilled in her, such as acceptance. She explained that her mother's weight began fluctuating as she got older, but her father was never judgmental of this. As a result, Nicole does not have a physical preference related to weight for men, and has dated men of all shapes and sizes. Nicole's physical preferences did not appear influenced by media in any way, but rather by the physical traits of her father that represented the nonphysical traits she desired in a potential partner, as well as the moral values her parents had instilled in her from a young age.

The idea of Nicole desiring a man who is similar to her father is also a noteworthy topic. Emily brought up this point in her interview when questioned about where she believes her personal physical preferences for men may have originated. She explained that the 25-year relationship between her father and mother, which she described as one of flirting, inside jokes, and small acts to show they care, is the kind of relationship she desires between herself and any potential partner. Emily, whose principal physical preference in a male is a “big, goofy grin,” explains that she would ideally like a partner who is similar to her father in his optimism and good-naturedness, both of which were traits she believed were communicated to her by the big, goofy grin she desired. Thus, with her father presumably having the same “big, goofy grin,” it is telling that Emily chose this as the most important physical trait she was searching for in a partner. Lynda Boothroyd, a psychologist at Durham University in England, conducted a study concerning this idea that some women may prefer men with physical traits that resemble their father (Wenner 2007). The researchers performed on photographs of 15 random men, as well as the photographs of the fathers of 49 women participating in the study. Then the women were surveyed on the extent of their relationship with their fathers, and were divided according to whether or not their responses were positive or negative. Boothroyd concluded that the women with positive relationships with their fathers were more likely to be attracted to men who resembled their fathers, while women with more negative relationships did not find men who resembled their fathers appealing. It is not surprising then that Emily, who has a very close, positive relationship with her father, might desire someone who resembles him both physically and emotionally.

The influence of family in the creation of ideal physical preferences was also apparent in Tyler’s interview, my final male informant. Tyler was the exception among the male interviewees, as the media did not noticeably influence his preferences. Tyler’s ideal woman was busty, with a symmetrical face, straight posture, and wider hips. He explained that he preferred a natural woman who did not wear a lot of makeup, as well as a woman who appeared more maternal, citing the very

busty and curvy Sofia Vergara as an example of a female celebrity he found attractive. In his interview, he made reference to the appearance of the character of Donna in *That '70s Show* as desirable, but the character did not seem to play any part in the cultivation of his physical preferences. What did seem to exert considerable influence, however, were experiences of women in Tyler's childhood. Tyler explained that he had grown up in the '80s in a family of teachers, so he was surrounded by older women with a more natural look to them. He believes this is when his physical preference for natural, maternal-looking women first started. He recalls a specific memory during preschool, in which an older woman kissed him on the forehead and gazed at him intensely. Older women took a particular liking to him throughout his childhood, telling him he was the "cutest thing ever," which is what he believed first started his preference for natural, maternal woman figures. He also explained that he wanted a more mature woman because of the hardships he has experienced in his life. "I come from a harder life, so I want a girl with the same background. I want my girl to be cultured, experienced, and poised, who doesn't rely on her looks to get what she wants." Tyler's development of physical preferences for women correlates more with those of my three female informants, based more upon life experience and key female figures of his childhood than the influence of the media that affected Nolan, Jake, and Ryan's preferences.

RECONCILING THE DISPARITIES IN MEDIA INFLUENCE

Three of the four male informants in my study provided evidence of media's influence on their physical preferences, while none of my female informants provided such evidence, leading me to conclude that males are more likely to be more susceptible to the media's influence in their physical preferences for the opposite sex than women are. When considering the reasons why the media affected women's physical preferences markedly less than it affected those of men, with a capitalist economy that continually perpetuates images of the "ideal" woman, it is logical for the physical preferences of men to be more affected by media than women. As the research of Kilbourne and Mascia-Lees demonstrates, the capitalist economy disproportionately targets the ideal *female*

body; thus, a heightened incidence of media influence among heterosexual males is a logical result. My final male informant, Tyler, displayed a development of preferences from childhood experience similar to that of my female informants; it is important to note, however, that this particular informant engaged in the least media consumption of all of my male participants. Therefore, due to his lessened media consumption, it is logical that the media did not play as large of an influence in his preferences for females as the other males who regularly consumed forms of media such as television shows, advertisements, and pornography.

CONCLUSION

The implications of this study, especially among the male participants who exhibited a strong media influence in their interviews, are great; the results of the data provides evidence of the heavy impact of the capitalist economy in men's physical preferences for women, and, by extension, the maintenance of women's appearance. In her film *Killing Us Softly 4*, Jean Kilbourne examines the marked change that advertising experienced through a period of just 20 years, and the changes are disturbingly extreme, with women being portrayed as floor rugs or with impossibly thin waists as only a couple of examples. If advertising continues in this way, the objectification and sexualization of women in Western media will only increase with time, leading to further media influence in what men find attractive in women, and more extreme methods of maintaining the "ideal" female body. It is also likely that the capitalist economy will eventually focus its efforts on the perpetuation of the ideal *male* body to the same degree that it focuses on the female body, meaning that the results of re-doing this interview in 20 years could look very different, with pronounced media influences in the preferences of both male *and* female participants. All in all, it is clear that images in the media can play an influential role in formulating what one finds attractive in the opposite sex, and that this influence will only grow in the years to come.

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