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# What Physical Qualities are Perceived as Desirable by Students in Japan and Korea

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Meeting another person for the first time, what impresses us the most? Personality? Intelligence? Sense of humor? By choosing any of these qualities, we probably are deceiving ourselves. The characteristic that impresses us the most, when meeting anyone, from a student the first day in class to a store clerk in the local supermarket, is appearance. Whether the choice seems fair or not, attractive people are usually preferred over their less attractive peers.

What qualities of physical appearance causes one person to be more attractive than someone else? Our research focuses on answers to the question: "What do people perceive to be attractive?" To find replies, we asked students in Japan and Korea what they considered to be the most desired physical traits in men and women. We compared their listings to those developed in the U.S.A. Before offering the lists, we describe research about attractiveness to underline its impact on people's lives.

## ATTRACTION

When Shakespeare wrote in the "Rape of Lucrece:"

Beauty itself doth of itself persuade

The eyes of men without an orator

he foreordained what twentieth century research was later to prove. Outer beauty, or physical attractiveness, plays an influential role in determining responses for a wide range of interpersonal interactions, including persuading others. The evidence supports the contention that, initially, we respond more favorably to those we see as physically attractive than we view as unattractive.

Research in the 1970s and 1980s showed that appearance affects our choice of friends, lovers and mates. For students and teachers, appearance can impact on student grades and on teacher performance ratings (Cash & Janda, 1984). The seminal research of Berscheid & Walster (1969) tells us that the more attractive a person, the more desirable characteristics will be attributable to that person. Attractive people are perceived as more sensitive, happier, interesting, warmer, more poised, more sociable, and possessing better character than the less attractive. This stereotype is confirmed by Dion, Berscheid &

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Walster (1972) who affirm, "What is beautiful is good." On the other hand, unattractive people tend to be on the receiving end of negative behavior (Farina, Fischer, Sherman, Smith, Groh & Mermin, 1977).

Cash, Gillen & Burns (1977) add to the affirmation that what is beautiful is good. They found that attractive women were perceived as being more feminine, and that attractive men were viewed as being more masculine than their less attractive counterparts. They concluded what is beautiful is sex-typed.

Tavris (1977) studied the importance of physical attractiveness to dating partners. She concluded that the men who participated in her study emphasized a preference for attractive women whereas women participants were not all that concerned about attractiveness among the men they dated. Yet in another study (Walster, Aronson, Abrahams & Rottmann, 1966), physical attractiveness was as important an asset for a man as for a woman, and a reliable indicator of how much a date would be liked by his or her partner.

Walster et. al. (1966) hypothesized that, although we may be attracted to only the best-looking partners, when we actually invite someone on a date, we are apt to select a person similar to ourselves in physical attractiveness. We may confront an unwanted rejection if we opt for only the best-looking person available. We try to maximize the attractiveness of our pick and at the same time minimize the possibility of rejection.

Often attractive people are married to unattractive mates. Unattractive men, for example, married to attractive women are perceived differently than would if both man and wife were attractive. The man is often thought to be highly intelligent, rich, famous, or successful thereby offsetting the imbalance in looks. Unattractive women are not given such compensating attributes, causing wonder about what the unattractive women possess to marry their attractive husbands (Bar-Tal & Saxe, 1976).

Cash, Gillen & Burns (1977) believe that physical attractiveness may be an advantage in obtaining a job, being given a more prestigious job, or being hired at a higher salary. Once at work, less attractive people may be discriminated against on performance appraisals unless they consistently produce at a high level.

Persuading others to our way of thinking, as Shakespeare prophesied, has a lot to do with how attractive we are to our listeners. If we can also marshal effective arguments and demonstrate that we know what we are talking about, our persuasive abilities more likely will succeed (Chaiken, 1986).

Interestingly, attractive defendants in criminal courts are less likely to be judged guilty and, if they are, they are more likely to receive a shorter sentence (Kulka & Kessler, 1978). For some crimes, attractiveness may be a handicap as in cases involving crimes like swindling, that is, to cheat or defraud a person. Attractive rape victims may be perceived as provokers of the attack (Seligman, Brickman & Koulack, 1977).

At this juncture, the question of what constitutes attractiveness seems relevant. In forthcoming sections we provide answers at least to what college students in Japan and Korea perceive as relevant. But the answers are less than clear-cut. Too many aspects of attraction vary with the situation, the time in a person's life and time in the historical sense, and the preferences of the individual student participants,. Probably the most common reaction as to what constitutes attractiveness revolves around judgments about physical features such as the hair, eyes, nose, mouth, chest/breasts, legs, and so on, features which make up the listings in this study. Other characteristics are considered, although not here, such as fidelity, sensitivity, warmth, personality, kindness, tenderness and patience. Regardless of what qualities are chosen, our perception of ideal characteristics change over time. As Knapp & Hall (1922) emphasize, beauty is in the era of the beholder as well as in the eye.

## METHODOLOGY

To gain the perceptions of university students in Japan and Korea about what men and women consider the most desirable physical traits, a fifteen-item, five point Likert-type scale was administered to 180 Japanese university students (101 men, 79 women; 135 lower division, 45 upper division; 18-22 years old) and 187 Korean university students (144 men, 73 women; 142 lower division, 45 upper division; 18-31 years old). The respondents decided what they thought to be the fifteen most desirable physical traits to the least desirable.

To understand how the Japanese and Korean choices were similar to American selections made prior to this study, simple comparisons were made. No attempts to statistically analyze the data were undertaken. The intent was to obtain representative choices, nothing more.

## RESULTS

The following lists were compiled from the Japanese and Korean data obtained in the study. In each case, the first named physical feature was always the one selected by the highest percentage of respondents; the second, the second highest percentage; and so on down the list with the last characteristic named gaining the lowest percentage of respondents.

## KOREAN STUDENTS' LIST

### MEN

[What men look at in women]

1. Smile
2. Eyes
3. Hair
4. Legs
5. Breasts
6. Weight
7. Hips
8. Laugh
9. Height
10. Nose
11. Mouth
12. Stomach
13. Buttocks
14. Chin
15. Muscles

### WOMEN

[What women look at in men]

1. Eyes
2. Smile
3. Height
4. Hair
5. Laugh
6. Stomach
7. Weight
8. Muscles
9. Legs
10. Nose
11. Mouth
12. Chin
13. Chest
14. Hips
15. Buttocks

## JAPANESE STUDENTS' LIST

### MEN

[What men look at in women]

1. Smile
2. Hair
3. Eyes
4. Laugh
5. Stomach
6. Mouth
7. Nose
8. Weight
9. Legs
10. Buttocks
11. Chin
12. Hips
13. Breasts
14. Height
15. Muscles

### WOMEN

[What women look at in men]

1. Hair
2. Smile
3. Laugh
4. Eyes
5. Height
6. Mouth
7. Nose
8. Stomach
9. Weight
10. Muscles
11. Chin
12. Legs
13. Chest
14. Buttocks
15. Hips

The most desired physical traits of Americans are listed next. This listing is compiled from a variety of sources (cf. Klopf & Cambra, 1996; Ullman, 1988) including informal discussions in university communication classes.

## AMERICAN LIST

Men	Women
[What men look at in women]	[What women look at in men]
1. Smile	1. Smile
2. Eyes	2. Eyes
3. Weight	3. Laugh
4. Legs	4. Weight
5. Breasts	5. Height
6. Laugh	6. Hair
7. Hair	7. Buttocks
8. Buttocks	8. Legs
9. Mouth	9. Muscles
10. Stomach	10. Chest
11. Height	11. Mouth
12. Hips	12. Nose
13. Nose	13. Stomach
14. Chin	14. Chin
15. Muscles	15. Hips

## DISCUSSION

Physical appearance is influential in determining whether a person is sought out. It has a bearing on whether a person is able to persuade or manipulate others. It is a factor, in many cultures, in the selection of dates and marriage partners. It is a deciding factor in judgments of another person's personality, sexuality, popularity, success and often happiness.

What qualities of physical appearance attract people? This study attempted to answer that question at least as it bears on Japanese and Korean university students. The responses direct our attention to one predominant characteristic, one singled out by the men as most desirable and given notable respect by the women. The illustrious British playwright and poet, Ben Jonson, aptly describes the affect of this quality from a man's view: "She is Venus when she smiles." The smile stands out as the engaging characteristic in the respondents' thinking.

Roger Axtell (1991) who studied nonverbal communication world-wide calls the smile "the ultimate gesture" since it is known everywhere in the world. It is "absolutely universal," he claims, and rarely misunderstood. Primitive tribes and world leaders alike

know and use it. Axtell goes on to say that scientists believe the smile releases chemicals called endorphins into the system that create a feeling of mild euphoria. Its universal recognition means the smile can be utilized to get us out of the prickliest of difficult situations, Axtell instructs, and according to him, we should use it freely and use it often.

Ekman & Friesen (1982) contend that the smile can be the most misunderstood of facial expressions. It can conceal true feelings and send false messages. Fast (1970) supposes that we may smile our way through the day when in fact we may feel angry and annoyed beneath the smile. In school our teachers smile at the students, the students smile at the teacher, and very few of the smiles have any real significance. The smile sometimes is a mask we wear. It hides our true feelings as we practice a careful discipline. Nonetheless, the smile rates highest among the Japanese and Koreans, and, for that matter, the Americans also, as the most desirable characteristic of another person's physical appearance.

Eyes and hair rank second to the smile. The eyes may be perceived as a desirable quality because they are the most important source of information. They transmit the most subtle nuances of meaning through such means as the length of glance, the opening of eyelids, squinting, and a dozen other manipulations of the skin and eyes (Fast, 1970). The Spanish philosopher, José Ortega y Gasset, felt that the eyes, with its lids and socket, its iris and pupil, was equivalent to a "whole theater with its stage and actors." It functions, he wrote, "with the straight-line accuracy of a bullet." We look to the eyes for meaning, and by masking them alone, we can cloud the identity of a person (Hickson & Stacks, 1989). The eyes are desirable features of physical appearance.

Hair captures attention. The American basketball player, Dennis Rodman, colors his hair in rainbow hues to titillate the curiosity of spectators at basketball games. Men wear shoulder length hair for the same reason or to be in the latest fashion. Hair modes change, however, and one season pony tails may be stylish, the next, rat tails, braids, patterns shaved into the hair, or skin heads, the fashions being fickle and inconstant.

Men's hair fashions come and go, but women's more so. Women may wear their hair in bangs, bobs, chignons, feather cuts, French knots, long manes, page-boys, pigtails, pompadours, shags, shingles, swirls, updos, windblown, among other possibilities, all requiring time and money to style. Percy Bysshe Shelley's thoughts about what hair does for a woman offer clues as to why women attend religiously to their hair: "Blind with thine hair the eyes of Day." A pretty "do" may detract from physical shortcomings. Knapp & Hall(1992) suggest that hair styles can dramatically affect perception and human interaction.

Another notable item on the lists of the Japanese and Korean men as well as the American men is the ranking of legs and breasts, among the Koreans and Americans because of the high ranking and among the Japanese because of the low ranking. The

Koreans and Americans obviously see these two anatomical features of women as desirable, but the Japanese do not. Further investigation is needed to determine the causes of the rankings.

Then, too, the laugh merits consideration. The women especially view this feature as likable among men. Yet the Japanese men hold the laugh in high esteem for women. Height also holds the women's interest and, as Knapp & Hall (1992) aver, taller men are frequently perceived as more attractive than shorter men. The women respondents apparently do not picture the ideal man as "*short*, dark and handsome." The model man is "*tall*, dark and handsome," according to romanticists.

Regardless of the respondents' reactions to the physical human features, we need to keep foremost in our thinking the fact that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Shakespeare wrote in "Love's Labour's Lost": "Beauty is bought by judgment of the eye, not utter'd by base sale of chapmen's tongues," a chapman being a merchant, one who buys and sells. What one man or woman might consider attractive, another may not. The decision is personal, and not necessarily the result of a sales effort on some person's part.

Whatever conclusions we reach about the judgments of the Japanese and Korean respondents and those of the Americans as well regarding what is attractive in people and what is not, we ought to remember that appearance influences our communicative behavior. The English poet and satirist, Charles Churchill, provides a few lines of advice that we offer as a summary to this study. He wrote several centuries ago:

Keep up appearances; there lies the test;  
The world will give thee credit for the rest.  
Outward be fair, however foul within:  
Sin if thou wilt, but then in secret sin.

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