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Desire to Be Included Among Desirable Women

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Synonyms

[Appearance enhancement effort](#); [Attractiveness effort](#); [Epigamic display](#); [Intersexual selection](#)

Definition

Women's desire to be considered among "desirable" women involves motivation and effort toward displaying attributes that enhance their desirability as either a mating or social partner.

Introduction

Men, more than women, prefer physically attractive and sexually faithful mates. Women and girls who are high on these desired traits might also be more popular within their same-sex peer networks. Accordingly, women, more than men, are motivated to display and accentuate these mate-value and peer-valued characteristics, which are, in part, signals of reproductively and socially relevant information. Social-cognitive mechanisms such as social comparison, as well as emotions

such as envy, appear to underlie some behaviors associated with women's desire to be considered among desirable women.

Across diverse human cultures, men's and women's mate preferences have been shown to diverge in reproductively important ways. One of the most consistent sex differences is men's greater expressed preference for physically attractive partners. For instance, Buss (1989) found that in each of 37 cultures studied, men more than women desired partners who were youthful and physically attractive. Moreover, men are remarkably consistent in the specific features that they find attractive in a mate. These features typically include lustrous hair, clear skin, full breasts, feminine and symmetrical facial features, and a low waist-to-hip ratio (i.e., an hourglass figure) (Buss 1989; see Arnocky et al. 2014 for review). A growing body of evidence suggests that such physical features may have evolved, in part, as relatively honest cues to reproductively important aspects of women's phenotypic condition, including youth (i.e., being of reproductive age), underlying health, and/or fertility (Arnocky et al. 2014). Ancestral men who happened to be attracted to these features would therefore have out-reproduced those who did not share their preferences (Arnocky et al. 2014). To the extent that mate preferences for condition-linked physical features are heritable, such preferences would proliferate and become prevalent in the population.

Another mate preference along which men and women sometimes differ is the desire for fidelity in a long-term partner. In the Buss (1989) study, 23 of 37 cultures expressed a sex difference whereby men more than women preferred a chaste partner. As with physical attractiveness, a mating partner's chastity also bears more heavily on men's, relative to women's, reproductive success. Due to concealed ovulation and the internal fertilization process of human reproduction, men can never be certain of their paternity. Indeed, genetic cuckoldry continues in contemporary human society, although estimates of its frequency vary considerably. Accordingly, ancestral men who valued fidelity in a partner may have been less susceptible to cuckoldry (i.e., unwittingly investing parental effort toward offspring that are not genetically one's own) and thus may have been more reproductively successful relative to men who did not value chastity.

Given men's preferences for youthful, attractive, and faithful partners, it is intuitive that intersexual selection (i.e., mate choice) would favor women who best display these features. For example, physically attractive women are more likely to be asked out on dates (Walster et al. 1966), are more likely to be approached by men at social gatherings such as parties (Prestia et al. 2002), are more successful at poaching mates (i.e., stealing a partner from an already established mating relationship) (Sunderani et al. 2013), become sexually active earlier in life (i.e., have a longer period of reproductive potential), and have more long-term dating partners compared to less physically attractive women (Rhodes et al. 2005). Not surprisingly, physically attractive women are thus able to express greater choosiness for who they mate with. Similarly, women who are perceived as chaste (i.e., easy to mate with within the relationship, but hard for other men to mate with) are more desirable as dating partners than either uniformly hard or uniformly easy-to-mate-with women (Walster et al. 1973). The mating advantage afforded to women who best typify men's mate preferences serves as a powerful force in directing women's social-cognitive functioning, emotions, and

behavioral efforts toward being considered desirable as a mate.

Evidence of Women's Desire to be Physically Attractive

Whereas features of physical attractiveness may have evolved as honest cues to mate value, there exists abundant historical and cross-cultural evidence that women have long attempted to augment their physical appearances in ways that coincide with men's mate preferences. To a degree, women can influence the honesty of the cues associated with phenotypic features and in doing so benefit their mating success. When women are asked how they attract mates (i.e., successful intersexual selection), they often report attempting to explicitly enhance their physical appearances, such as through wearing makeup, wearing stylish clothes, keeping clean and well-groomed, as well as using skin-tanning products and applying nail polish (see Arnocky and Vaillancourt 2014 for review). Western women spend nearly ten times more money than men on products meant to enhance their physical appearances and are twice as likely to work on their appearance for more than 1 h per day (see Arnocky and Vaillancourt 2014). Three lines of evidence stemming from (1) explicit surveying and manipulation of mating motives and (2) ovulatory shifts in fertility, and (3) effects of differential mate availability, converge to suggest that women's use of appearance-enhancement behaviors are broadly linked to their mating motives.

First, mating motives have been shown to predict a range of appearance-enhancement behaviors among women. Hill et al. (2012) showed that although spending on most products decreases during an economic recession (or when experimentally primed with recession cues), women nevertheless increase spending on appearance-enhancing products (termed "the lipstick effect"). Moreover, the researchers found that women's reported preference for attracting mates with resources mediated this effect. Further experimental evidence suggests that women's appearance-enhancement motives are often linked to a desire

to be viewed as attractive to members of the opposite sex. For instance, Hill and Durante (2011) found that single women who were primed with mating motives (versus control) were more interested in skin tanning and taking risky diet pills, highlighting the disconcerting fact that women sometimes engage in appearance-enhancement efforts that are risky to their health as a function of their mating motives. For example, eating disorders are significantly more common among those who are most likely involved in intersexual selection and intrasexual competition. Heterosexual women in their prime reproductive years, compared to men, older women who are outside of reproductive age, and homosexual women, are more likely to exhibit eating disorder symptoms (e.g., Abed et al. 2012). Eating disorder behavior has also recently been shown to be predicted by a fast life history (characterized by greater reproductive and mating effort) among college-age women (Abed et al. 2012). It is important to note that physical appearance enhancement is not only a function of women's initial mate-attraction efforts but is also reported by women, more than men, as an effective mate-retention tactic (see Arnocky and Vaillancourt 2014 for review).

Second, shifts in appearance-related efforts occur throughout the menstrual cycle. When women are in the fertile phase of the cycle, they are more likely to wear more revealing clothing; an effect that is enhanced among those women higher in sociosexuality (Durante et al. 2008). Women also report an increase in self-perceived attractiveness and feelings of sexiness during ovulation (see Durante et al. 2008 for review). During ovulation, women have been shown to increase their behaviors associated with intersexual selection (i.e., outcompeting rivals for the favor of desired males). Haselton and colleagues (2007) showed that partnered women who were photographed at high and low fertility points in the menstrual cycle were rated as "trying to look more attractive" during high fertility phases, and the closer women were to ovulation when photographed, the more frequently their fertile photograph was classified as attempting to enhance their appearance. This hormonally

regulated effect appears to be driven by a desire to outdo attractive rival women. For instance, women have been shown to choose products that enhance their physical appearance (e.g., "sexy" rather than more conservative clothing) more frequently during ovulation. Importantly, this ovulatory shift in behavior occurs when women view photos of attractive intrasexual rivals, but not after viewing unattractive rivals, attractive, or unattractive men (Durante et al. 2011).

Third, where men are scarce, women have been found to wear more revealing clothing, relative to where men are abundant (Barber 1999), suggesting that increased ecological pressure on securing a mate may increase women's efforts in the realm of intersexual selection.

Social-Cognitive and Emotional Influences on Women's Appearance Enhancement

Competing for mates depends not only on individuals' own attributes but also on the attributes of intrasexual competitors (Arnocky et al. 2016). From this perspective, women who are best able to compare their mate-value characteristics to those of their nearest rivals would be better able to determine the requisite level of investment in ornamentation necessary to outcompete rivals for desired mating opportunities, without over-investing. Moreover, unfavorable social comparisons on dimensions of physical attractiveness may result in an emotional response of envy (i.e., the unpleasant experience of hostility, inferiority, and resentment toward those who possess something desirable), which may in turn motivate appropriate compensatory behavior(s) aimed at augmenting that characteristic. To test this hypothesis, Arnocky et al. (2016) randomly assigned women to one of two conditions: an appearance-based social comparison condition, where women viewed magazine ads containing female models and were asked to compare their appearance to the target, and a control condition where women viewed different magazine ads from the same companies, but which did not feature a female model prominently in the

ad. Following the priming condition, women reported on their state feelings of envy, followed by measures assessing a host of appearance-enhancement motives. Their results indicated that women who were primed to make physical appearance comparisons to models expressed more envy compared to controls, and the envy in turn predicted more favorable attitudes toward having cosmetic surgery, more intended use of facial cosmetics, and more willingness to use a risky diet pill. These findings suggest that women's mating-relevant ornamentation efforts are sensitive to environmental inputs in terms of the relative quality of their same-sex conspecifics, as well as the emotional outcomes of such comparisons.

Evidence of Women's Desire to be Perceived as Chaste

When men invest in offspring, women behave in ways that will ensure or reinforce greater paternity confidence. Following births, hospital room videotapes indicate that mothers (and other relatives) allege paternal resemblance of the newborn much more often than maternal resemblance, supporting the hypothesis that women behave in ways to promote paternity confidence (i.e., enforce their chastity) to male partners. Women also generally report having fewer sex partners than men, and confusion has existed in the literature as to whether this is a function of male overreporting, female underreporting, or perhaps both. This is complicated by the fact that as many as 60 % of undergraduate men and women report having acted deceptively with their representation of their number of previous sexual partners (Horan 2015). One recent study sought to address this differential disclosure by having half of the sample's participants complete a questionnaire on sexual and social behaviors while connected to a lie detector (which was, unbeknown to the participants, nonfunctional). Results showed a significant gender by lie detector interaction, whereby women (more than men) were more likely to report not having engaged in sexual intercourse when disconnected from a lie detector compared

to women who were connected to the lie detector. Women in the lie detector condition reported having more lifetime sex partners than women in the no lie detector condition. Importantly, self-reporting of other types of male or female-typical behaviors did not vary as a function of being attached to a lie detector (Fisher 2013). This suggests that women may underestimate when disclosing information about their sexuality, perhaps as a mode of preserving a reputation of sexual restrictedness.

Taken together, evidence suggests that women attempt to augment their physical appearances and sexual reputations in a manner that conforms to the mate-preferences of men. Yet beyond intersexual selection, individual differences in these characteristics can also influence desirability within the broader social network, with mating-relevant implications.

Attractiveness, Sexual Behavior, and Social Status and Affiliation

Both physical attractiveness and sexual reputation have been linked to girls' and women's social statuses, friendships, and affiliations. Ancestrally, social acceptance would have played a vital role in acquiring food, shelter, protection, and mating opportunities (Brown et al. 2009). Moreover, females' relative to male's same-sex affiliations are characterized by greater emotional and informational support (Hall 2011). Women report that their same-sex friends provide mating advice and assist in mate-acquisition (Bleske and Buss 2000). Brown et al. (2009) argued that in achieving social acceptance, individuals are able thus to focus more of their attention and efforts toward mating. Across two studies, the authors showed that cues to social acceptance (e.g., being included in a ball-tossing game) increased participants' interest in mating with targets whose faces were presented on a screen.

The influence of physical attractiveness upon the lives of women begins at an early age, including having effects on social affiliation. For instance, Krantz (1987) found that for girls, but not boys, those rated as being most physically

attractive prior to beginning kindergarten were more likely to be considered popular in school. In adolescence, longitudinal research has shown that physical attractiveness correlates with peer-rated popularity within the social group (Arnocky and Vaillancourt 2012). Even socially rejected girls are less likely to be overtly victimized by their peers if they happen to be physically attractive (Knack et al. 2012). Among young-adult college students, attractive individuals are perceived to have more socially desirable personalities. Attractive women may be ascribed with higher social status and exert more social influence compared to less attractive women (see Arnocky et al. 2014). Moreover, attractive individuals (both men and women) are more likely to receive social help. Benson et al. (1976) left a completed graduate school application form, a photograph of the applicant, and an addressed, stamped envelope in a telephone booth. The picture varied by attractiveness (high and low) and ethnicity (black and white). The applicant's physical attractiveness predicted whether or not the application was delivered. However, some research suggests that the importance of physical attractiveness to friendships and overall social acceptance may be primarily relevant in cultures where individual choice in the establishment and maintenance of social relations is the norm (Anderson et al. 2008). Nevertheless, there is some research to suggest that females explicitly understand the importance of physical attractiveness to their social status: When asked to describe popularity, girls more than boys identified being attractive as an important component of being popular (Closson 2009).

Sexual behavior has also been linked to girls' popularity and friendships. Considering females' significant obligatory parental investment, female sexuality is a scarcer resource than males'. Baumeister and Vohs (2004) have argued that women would thus benefit from regulating the value of their sexuality by artificially restricting the supply via placing "pressure on each other to exercise sexual restraint" (Baumeister and Vohs 2004, p. 344). Such pressure may be exerted via social affiliation, whereby less sexually restricted females may become socially isolated and/or chastised by other females. Because of this, it

has been argued that adolescent girls experience and express firm social norms that sexual behavior should not occur outside of dating relations (see Arnocky and Vaillancourt 2012 for review). Prinstein et al. (2003) found that adolescent sexual activity correlated positively with reputation-based popularity, but not likeability among peers. Moreover, increasing number of sex partners correlated with lower popularity. Kreager and Staff (2009) found that girls with many sex partners reported having fewer friends – a relationship that did not exist among male participants. Moreover, women who are low in sociosexuality (i.e., have a more monogamous orientation toward sexual activity) are more sensitive to the popularity impacts of various dating risk situations (Rinehart 2012). Recently, Vrangalova et al. (2013) surveyed 750 undergraduates about their sexual behaviors and attitudes. Then, participants read a short description of a hypothetical person of the same sex who had either 2 or 20 past sex partners. Participants then rated this hypothetical persona as a potential friend. Results showed that women, regardless of their own sexual histories, overwhelmingly preferred the potential friend with fewer past sex partners. Given the adaptive significance of social acceptance, women who exhibit characteristics that are associated with receiving social acceptance, friendship, and status are likely advantaged in a variety of reproductively relevant domains.

Conclusion

Over human evolutionary history, the establishment and maintenance of long-standing peer and mating relationships would have been impactful upon women's reproductive success. Yet not all women are desired equally for these important relationships – and some women exhibit morphological and behavioral characteristics that improve their success in domains or interpersonal desirability. In considering two such characteristics, physical attractiveness and sexual reputation, both of which impact interpersonal attraction and interaction, research suggests that women who typify these and other important mate-value

and/or peer-valued characteristics are often more desirable as romantic partners and same-sex friends. Unsurprisingly, women, more than men, express psychological and behavioral tendencies toward augmenting and displaying these characteristics, which may benefit their success in intersexual sexual selection and social relations.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Body Attractiveness](#)
- ▶ [Eating Disorders](#)
- ▶ [Evolutionary Standards of Female Attractiveness](#)
- ▶ [Intra-Sexual Competition Between Females](#)
- ▶ [Intrasexual Rivalry among Women](#)
- ▶ [Men's Mate Preferences](#)
- ▶ [Peer Competition & Cooperation](#)
- ▶ [Peer Competition & Cooperation](#)
- ▶ [Peer Selection](#)
- ▶ [Reproductive Potential](#)
- ▶ [Sociosexuality](#)

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