Why we want sex with beautiful people

We can't help ourselves. Why do we like and favor beautiful people? It's because we want *sex* with them. Crude answer, no doubt, but think about it.

What if I told you that the underlying motive for all human behavior, whether in politics, religion, and socioeconomics is about reproductive success, that everything we do, either directly or indirectly, whether we realize it, is ultimately about passing on our genes to the next generation?

If what [evolutionary psychologists](#) are telling us are correct, then all our behavior are at the end governed by *sex* and *mating*. Reproductive success is the purpose of our biological existence, so they say. We live so we can successfully pass on our genes to the next generation. Sure, we may say we work hard to earn that job promotion or higher salary. But underlying our justification, evolutionary psychologists exert, is actually about creating a more conducive environment that ensures our genes are more successfully passed on to our children and to theirs and so on. In the same way, we may say we ought to choose our life partner with great care. Someone to love, so we say, someone we can grow old with. Whatever our reasons, ultimately, choosing the right life partner (or *partners*) ensures our genes are successfully and effectively passed on to the next generation.

And to ensure good—not inferior—genes have the greater chance of surviving over many successive generations, nature relies on *beauty*. Beautiful, good looks are often a sign of good health and fertility in an individual, so evolution has conditioned us to prefer certain looks. This is why we immediately recognize beautiful people.

Admit it, we like *beautiful* things. We like beautiful houses, beautiful gardens, beautiful sceneries, and beautiful cars. We prefer pedigree to mongrel pets. Even movies are somehow better when their main actors are beautiful. And, if the world was our oyster, we would likely have more than one life partner, either simultaneously or serially, and all our partners would be strikingly beautiful. And, *yes*, we would rather have sex with beautiful people than with plain looking people and certainly not with ugly people. Holding everything else constant, we prefer our children to look beautiful too.

Some scientists have established several criteria that defines female beauty such as having [a waist-to-hip ratio of about 0.7](#) and even how far apart must the eyes be from each other (*i.e.*, optimally 46% of facial width) and how high the eyes should be above the mouth (optimally 36% of facial length). But no one needs to whip out a ruler or measuring tape to determine whether someone is beautiful. We immediately recognize beauty when we see it. More than three decades of research have shown that our beauty detection sensor is innate, built in into our DNA. How do we know this?

Studies have shown that even babies as young as one week to three months old will look more intently and longer at pictures of attractive faces. Infants, twelve months old, were observed in one study to play more and were less distress and less withdrawn when interacting with adults wearing attractive masks than those who wore unattractive masks. Even these infants played more with facially more attractive dolls than those with less attractive faces.

Not only do we immediately recognize beautiful people, but we are also compelled to want beautiful people to be around us. Social experiments carried out by [ABC's 20/20](#), an investigative journalism for TV, for instance, revealed that attractive people are more likely to receive help from strangers (whether of the same or opposite gender) than less attractive people. Even attractive waitresses earn higher tips, as much as 50% more, than their less attractive colleagues. Such trends are not isolated because other experiments, carried out in a more controlled and scientifically rigorous manner, have observed similar trends, that attractive people often have the upper hand over their less attractive counterparts.

Whether we care to admit it, especially in today's age of political correctness, being physically beautiful can put us in a significant advantage over those who

are plain looking. Being good looking, simply put, makes us more sexually attractive, and this in turn promises us great rewards.

In the animal kingdom, peacocks with large, showy tail get the peahens. The larger and the more showy the tail, the more chances the peacocks would mate and the more offspring they would have in their reproductive lifespan. This is an astonishing phenomenon considering having a large, showy tail carries enormous cost and risk to the peacock. Having such an elaborate tail is costly in terms of resources needed to maintain such a tail, and it also endangers the life of the peacock because such a tail can be more easily seen by predators. But the reward is enormous because the owner of such a large, showy tail gets to mate and pass on its genes to the next generation. Such animal signaling is very common in the animal kingdom. The mating dance of Birds-of-Paradise is only one of the many more examples where the more extravagant and choreographed the dance, the more chance the male bird will successfully mate.

Rewards of being beautiful: At great cost and risk to its life, the larger and the more showy the peacock tail, the more likely the male bird gets to mate and pass its genes to the next generation. Likewise, our physical beauty makes us sexually attractive with potentially great returns (photo from wired.com).

But animal signaling is not just constrained to the animal kingdom. We too behave in such a way. Being physically attractive is our version of animal signaling. In the intense competition of the workplace, first impressions do matter. Our face and

our body are our ambassadors, instantly recognizable, whether we want it, because being good looking quickly conveys our potential worth: that we are competent, talented, trustworthy, intelligent, and superior. Our resumes or certificates can only take us so far, so says [Allison Wolf](), British economist and author of ["The XX Factor"](). Our worth will also include face-to-face evaluations—and being physically attractive, in addition to how we dress, can heavily tip the balance in our favor.

Life, so it appears, is unfair. [Daniel Hamermesh](), author of ["Beauty Pays: Why Attractive People Are More Successful"]() remarked that while many people are concern of discrimination over race, religion, and gender in the workplace, favoring attractive people over others is a much lesser known but just as important form of discrimination. Even employers who say they would not discriminate over people's appearance will unwittingly go ahead and do so, as studies revealed. This is because, as stated earlier, we are all hardwired to respond favorably to attractive people. According to [Gordon Patzer](), author of ["LOOKS: Why They Matter More Than You Ever Imagined"](), we tend to find attractive people more talented, kind, honest, and intelligent than less attractive people.

The victims are then the unattractive women and men, who according to Allison Wolf, tend to suffer just as much as each other in the workplace. However, it is the obese women, in particular, who tend to suffer more for their weight than men for their short height, according to a survey, cited by Allison Wolf in her book, of the labor market in the US and UK.

To further rub salt into the wounds of unattractive people, their attractive counterparts really do tend to be smarter, richer, and more successful.

The research led by [Satoshi Kanazawa]() from the [London School of Economics](), for example, studied more than 52,000 people in the US and UK over many years and found that attractive men and women scored respectively 13.6 and 11.4 points higher in IQ tests than the sample average. Furthermore, a 1994 study by Hamermesh and Biddle observed a positive relationship between attractiveness and the labor market earnings across a variety of occupations. Attractive individuals, they found, earned 5% more than those with average looks, and less attractive individuals earn 5 to 10% less.

People tend to see attractive people as being more intelligent, talented, confident, and having more positive beliefs. Consequently, attractive people tend to be more successful (for instance, earning higher salaries) than their less attractive colleagues at work (© leungchopan @ fotolia.com).

Other surveys since then have observed the same trends. A US survey cited by Catherine Hakim in her book "Erotic Capital: The Power of Attraction in the Boardroom and the Bedroom", for instance, found that good looking lawyers earned 10 to 12% more than less good looking lawyers. Similarly, a survey among MBA graduates found up to 15% difference in earnings between the most and least attractive people in the group. Even in courts, more attractive defendants tended to receive more lenient sentences (or even escape conviction entirely) or more likely to win their case and get larger financial settlements.

Taller men are perceived to be more attractive and have greater strength, energy, and resources. No surprise then that a study by researchers at the University of Florida, University of North Carolina, and University of Pittsburgh found that taller men tended to do significantly better in the labor market than shorter men, after controlling for differences in education, class, race, and general health.

However, that good looking people tend to be smarter, more confident, and more successful than their less attractive people could be a result of a so-called *cumulative effect*, according to [Lisa Walker and Tonya Frevert](#), two social psychologists from the University of North Carolina. Because attractive people tend to be looked upon favorably by others, they are often given more opportunities and challenges in which to cultivate and demonstrate their talents, knowledge, confidence, and other positive beliefs. So, it is perhaps not so much that attractive people are innately better than the less attractive people, but more because more doors are opened to attractive people. Less attractive people are simply not given as many opportunities than their attractive counterparts to excel.

But what exactly constitutes beauty? What makes a person beautiful? One popular misconception is that the media defines beauty for us based on some arbitrary standards, that girls, for instance, like to be slim and dye their hairs blonde because the media has arbitrarily defined slim blonde girls as beautiful. But this is simply untrue. Beauty as portrayed by media and ads are the consequence rather than the cause of what people find as beautiful. Although different cultures have different standards of beauty, there is a great deal of overlap or similarities between these various so-called beauty standards.

A common misconception that the media and advertisements set or enforce the standard of beauty on us. What we see on the media and ads are instead a consequence of what we ourselves desire in physical beauty (photo from koreanindo.net).

A series of studies in the 1980s and 1990s revealed that regardless of culture, race, geography, and level of exposure to Western media (or its lack thereof),

people remarkably agree with one another on whom they find as attractive and whom they do not. When photos of Victoria's Secret lingerie models were shown to the men from the Yanomami tribe of the Amazon rainforest, for instance, the men remarked that these models were *moko dude* (or 'perfectly ripe' for mating).
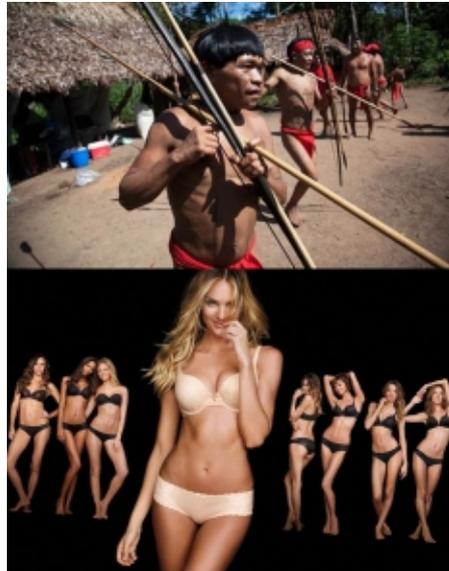
Different cultures have similar views on what constitutes beauty. Yanomami tribal men, when shown photos of Victoria's Secret lingerie models, remarked that these models were 'perfectly ripe' for mating (photos from Ariana Cubillos/AP and Victoria's Secret).

In 1989, David Buss from the University of Michigan, surveyed more than 10,000 male preferences of females across 37 highly diverse cultures in 33 countries. Regardless if the males were from urban, Western societies or from traditional societies such as the Ache of Paraguay or Shiwiar of Ecuador, males consistently place a high premium on the physical attractiveness, in particular on youth, of potential female mates. On average, men all over the world found women most suitable as mates at 25 years of age. Studies by Langlois and his associates at the University of Texas in 2000 and in particular those spanning the late 1980s to

1990s carried out by [Michael Cunningham](#) from the [University of Louisville](#) consistently showed that people within the same culture or across different cultures were still able to agree with one another about whom was attractive and whom was not. Work by Cunningham and his colleagues showed that men found female faces with the following characteristics to be physically very attractive: relatively small chins, large eyes, high cheekbones, and full lips.

Controversial evolutionary psychologist, Satoshi Kanazawa, co-author of ["Why Beautiful People Have More Daughters"](#), went further by distinguishing six characteristics that define the ideal image of female beauty: youth, long hair, small waist, large breasts, blonde hair, and blue eyes, and there is an evolutionary logic, though some contentious as admitted by Kanazawa, to each of those six characteristics. Women with long hair, small waist, large breasts, and blonde hair reflect youth and good health, and in turn high reproductive value (the expected number of children a woman could have over her reproductive age) and high fertility (average number of children a woman would have at any given age).

Ideal female beauty I: Blonde and long hair, and blue eyes (© kjekol @ fotolia.com)

Ideal female beauty II: Small waist and large breasts. All these characteristics signify youth, good health, and peak fertility (© kjekol @ fotolia.com).

A 2004 study led by [Grazyna Jasienska](#) from the [Jagiellonian University](#), Poland, for example, showed that Polish women, aged 24 to 37 of age, with small waists and large breasts have greater reproductive potential, as indicated by their higher levels of reproductive hormones, over those with larger waists and smaller breasts. And the light blonde hair of young girls tend to turn darker and eventually into brown hair as the girls mature into older women. So blonde hair is often an indication of a woman's age. A woman who still retains a blonde hair often means she is still young and at peak fertility. Similarly, women with long hair indicate good health. Older or unhealthy women tend to have shorter and less lustrous hair due to less than optimal health. Consequently, men find women with long hair, especially if the hair is lustrous, to be highly attractive because such women radiate good health and good fertility.

Even without looking at a woman's face, hands, or body, we can often tell quite accurately if the woman is young, healthy, and good looking merely by looking if she has long lustrous hair like in this photo (photo from hairfinder.com).

But why we find people with blue eyes to be most attractive is still open to conjecture, but one possible reason is the color of the eye is related to how easily we can tell the size of the eye pupil. Our eye pupil increases in size when we see something interesting or captivating. See an attractive woman and our eye pupils dilate. So, compared to dark colors like dark brown or black, blue is the brightest color for human iris and such, blue makes it the easiest for us to tell the size of the eye pupil and thus, if the person is attracted to us. Perhaps not a coincidence then that studies in the 1960s and 1970s have found that some people describe people with light brown eyes as 'mysterious', but those with dark brown eyes are instead disliked by many, presumably because such a dark eye color makes it difficult for us to 'read' the emotions of the other person.

Blue eyes are most attractive perhaps because blue is the lightest color that allows us to 'read' people's interest in us (photo from cnn.com).

Other properties define beauty too, one of which is [bilateral symmetry of a face](). People find symmetrical faces more attractive because facial symmetry (where the left side of the face looks the same as the right side) indicates good genetic health and fertility. Ill people or people with genetic disruptions or those born in environments with high exposure to parasites, pathogens, and toxins tend to have less than symmetrical faces and are often regarded to be less than attractive.

Having mixed parentage may also endow us with exotic, good looks. Mixed or interracial marriages are an effective way to breakdown racial barriers and racism, but with several more added benefits. Children of mixed parentage are often attractive, sometimes much more so than their parents. Such good looks are a consequence of *[hybrid vigor or heterosis,]()* a theory first put forth by [Darwin]() in 1876. Heterosis is the tendency of a crossbred offspring to have enhanced traits or better genetic quality than both its parents. Canadian actor, [Kristin Kreuk](), among many others, is one such example of being stunningly beautiful due to mixed parentage. Even the facial features of Americans are expected to change by 2050 due to increasing popularity of mixed marriages there.

The exotic and stunning good looks of Canadian actor, Kristin Kreuk, the heterosis product of her mixed Dutch and Chinese parents (photo from CBS Portraits).
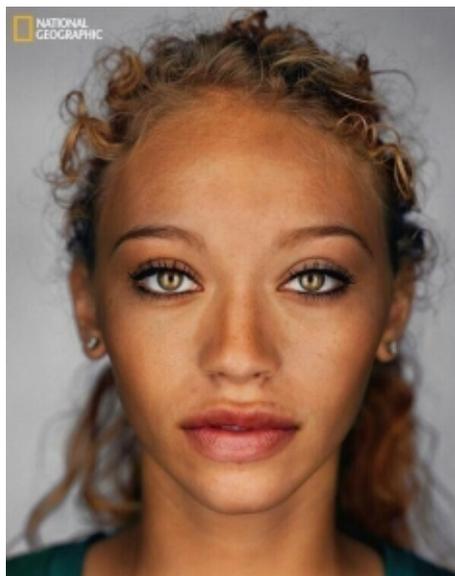
The future 'average' face of an American by 2050 as mixed marriages become increasingly frequent in the

US (photo from National Geographic).

Recently in 2015, researchers from the [University of New South Wales](#), Australia used an innovative approach to mimic evolutionary selection of female beauty. Using computerized images of female bodies and with the help of more than 60,000 online participants, female bodies were evolved over eight generations. Evolution of successive generations of female beauty was shaped by ratings given by online participants based on how much they liked the current generation of female beauty. At the end of the experiment, these Australian researchers found that female beauty evolved as we had expected, that female shapes considered beautiful are those characterized by small waists, long legs, and large breasts. Nonetheless, these researchers found that it is not any given female trait that makes a female shape beautiful but rather how well the various beauty traits are collectively expressed. In other words, it is not so much that large breasts makes a woman beautiful, but the combination of two more beauty traits such as the large breasts, small waists, and long, slender legs that ultimately makes a woman highly desirable.

Being beautiful, however, has its downsides. While attractive men can be considered as better leaders, sexist prejudice can work against attractive women, as opined by Lisa Walker and Tonya Frevert, social psychologists from the University of North Carolina. So, while attractive women can have the upper hand over their less attractive counterparts in certain levels of jobs, attractive women can be discriminated against in acquiring high-level jobs that require authority and strong leadership. Moreover, jealousy can occur among attractive people in the workplace, causing discrimination or loss of opportunities.

[Justin Trudeau](), the recently elected Prime Minister of Canada. He is hugely popular, not only for his liberal and progressive ideas, but also for his youth and good looks. But had Justin Trudeau been an attractive woman instead, the outcome of 'her' election could have been quite the opposite. Sexist prejudice can discriminate attractive women from holding high level posts that require authority and strong leadership.

But our perception of beauty is changing. Social norms of what should be considered beautiful are now emphasizing more on social fairness, sensitivity, and realism.

Falling sales of [Barbie dolls]() by 20% between 2012 and 2014 has seen [Mattel](), the doll maker of Barbie, do a makeover of its once highly popular Barbie. In 2015 Mattel introduced 23 new Barbie dolls with eight skin tones, 14 facial structures,

22 hairstyles, and 18 eyes colors. And on Jan. 28, 2016, Mattel has further introduced three types of Barbie dolls: [curvy, tall, and petite](). The curvy doll in particular has noticeably fatter thighs and protruding tummy and behind.

Slumping Barbie sales meant in 2015 and 2016, Mattel had to revamp its popular Barbie doll by introducing Barbie dolls with different skin and eye colors and physical attributes, notably including a curvy, petite, and tall versions of Barbie. The curvy Barbie, in particular has fatter thighs and a protruding tummy and behind (photo from Mattel).

[Madeline Stuart](), an 18-year-old fashion model, is yet another example of a change in people's perception of beauty. What makes Madeline story inspiring and highly unusual is she has [Downs Syndrome]().

Madeline Stuart, the 18 year-old doing what was previously

unthinkable: being a fashion and runway model and having Downs Syndrome. She is in the 2016 New York Fashion Week (photo from Madeline Stuart's Facebook).

Lane Bryant, a popular US retail store on women clothing, has recently been aggressively promoting a campaign celebrating women of all shapes and sizes. Print and video ads by Lane Bryant featured black-and-white pictures of six models, all of them plus-sizes.

Changing the perception of beauty: Lane Bryant's celebration of women in all shapes and sizes, featuring all plus-sizes models (photo from Lane Bryant).

And what makes the 2016 issue of Sports Illustrated (SI) Swimsuit different this year from the other years is the appearance of 28-year-old Ashley Graham, a plus-size model.

Plus-size model, Ashley Graham, will feature in the 2016 issue of Sports Illustrated Swimsuit edition (photo from SI).

So, blonde women who are slim and tall and who have small waist, large breasts, blue eyes, high cheekbones, petite nose, full lips, and small chins may be considered as highly desirable by men. But such beauty standards are increasingly seen today as too idealistic, that most of women would not be endowed with one or more such features for beauty perfection. The society is instead beginning to accept imperfection because that is more real and fair. Perhaps one day then, meritocracy based purely on people's intelligence, talent, and experience will no longer be skewed by physical and social attractiveness.

What is beauty then? It comprises outer and inner beauty. Focusing too much on our appearance can itself be detrimental, even if we are considered attractive, because it creates stress and anxiety. While our outer beauty fades with time, our inner beauty, in contrast, develops, and as it matures over time, we become an increasingly *wonderful* human being.

References

- Dockterman E. (2016) A Barbie for Every Body. Time. Feb. 8, 2016, pp. 34-41.
- Gangestad S.W., Scheyd G.J. (2005) The evolution of human physical attractiveness. Annual Review of Anthropology, 34, 23-48.
- Miller A., Kanazawa S. (2008) Why Beautiful People Have More Daughters: From Dating, Shopping, and Praying to Going to War and Becoming a Billionaire—Two Evolutionary Psychologists Explain Why We Do What We Do. Penguin, New York.
- ["The Surprising Downsides of Being Drop Dead Gorgeous"](#) by David Robson. Best of 2015: Psychology. Feb, 13, 2015. BBC.
- ["The Science of Beauty"](#) by The World According to Xenocrates. Feb. 4, 2009
- ["Why pretty people get ahead at work: Economist Alison Wolf examines the beauty advantage and its impact on office politics"](#) by The Daily Mail, UK. Oct. 10, 2013.

- [“Good looks will get you that job, promotion and raise: Beautiful people have the advantage in the workplace”](#) by Ray Williams. Psychology Today. Sep. 3, 2011.
- [“I'm Successful Because I'm Beautiful” — How We Discriminate Physical attractiveness can determine success in life”](#) by Ray Williams. Psychology Today. Aug. 18, 2012.