Attractiveness of the female body: Preference for average or supernormal?

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The main purpose of the present study was to contrast the two hypotheses of female body attractiveness. The first is the "preference-for-average" hypothesis: the most attractive female body is the one that represents the average body proportions for a given population [1]. The second is the "preference-for-supernormal" hypothesis: according to the so-called "peak shift effect", the most attractive female body is more feminine than the average [2]. We investigated the preference for three female body parts: waist to hip ratio (WHR), buttocks and breasts. There were 456 participants of both genders. Using a program for computer animation (DAZ 3D) three sets of stimuli were generated (WHR, buttocks and breasts). Each set included six stimuli ranked from the lowest to the highest femininity level. Participants were asked to choose the stimulus within each set which they found most attractive (task 1) and average (task 2). One group of participants judged the body parts that were presented in the global condition (whole body), while the other group judged the stimuli in the local condition (isolated body parts only).

A three-way analysis of variance for three body parts was performed (factors: task, context and gender). WHR: The main effect of task was obtained, $F_{1,452} = 189.50$, $p=.01$, indicating that the attractive WHR is smaller (more feminine) than the average one. The main effect of context was significant, $F_{1,452} =165.43$, $p=.001$, indicating that WHR is smaller (more feminine) in the global than in the local context.. Buttocks: The main effect of task was significant, $F_{1,452} = 99.18$, $p=.001$, indicating that attractive buttocks are larger than the average ones. Breasts: The main effect of task was significant, $F_{1,452} = 247.89$, $p=.001$, indicating that most attractive breasts are larger than the average ones. The main effect of gender was significant, $F_{1,452} = 16.39$, $p=.001$, indicating that males chose significantly larger breasts than females. The main effect of context was significant, $F_{1,452} = 53.89$, $p=.001$, indicating that the chosen breast size was larger in the global than in the local context. Finally, the interaction gender × task was significant, $F_{1,452} = 25.00$, $p=.001$. Post hoc tests (Scheffé) have shown that, compared to females, males chose larger breasts as most attractive in both contexts.

In short, these findings support the preference-for-supernormal hypothesis: the most attractive WHR, buttocks and breasts are more feminine than average ones, for both genders and in both presentation conditions.

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