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The Types of Beautiful Skin Colors in Different Cultures

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Visual, tactile, and olfactory perceptions of skin play important roles in love attraction. They are among the favorite sensory features that are attractive to lovers. For example, studies have revealed that clear, smooth, and soft skin of a nice color, good-looking lips, long hair, a muscular build, and a great stature are valuable mating qualities (see for review, Karandashev et al., 2016). The types of beautiful skin, however, vary in different cultures.

Why Does Beautiful Skin Matter in Love?

Men and women appreciate the skin of their partners' bodies, faces, lips, hands, and hair, which are clear and nicely looking, feel soft and smooth, and smell good. While they are kissing, men and women enjoy seeing how lovely the lips look and how smoothly they feel. They enjoy seeing and touching their partner's good hair (Karandashev et al., 2016).

The researchers revealed that skin tone, hair length, and hair color influence perceptions of women's physical attractiveness, health, and fertility (Swami et al. 2008).

THE CULTURAL VALUE OF BEAUTIFUL SKIN IS HIGHER IN A WARM CLIMATE

Researchers believe that the importance of skin characteristics for the attractiveness of mates depends on the climate—hotter or colder. In a warm climate, people tend to wear light clothes that expose their skin more, compared to a cold climate where people need clothes to keep their bodies warm. A recent study showed that in countries with a warmer climate, such as Portugal and Georgia, women place a higher value on skin characteristics. In contrast to this, in the cold climate of Russia, skin characteristics had low importance for both men and women (Karandashev et al., 2016, 2020).

WHAT SKIN COLOR IS CONSIDERED BEAUTIFUL IN VARIOUS CULTURES

A global anthropological project in the 1980s studied 51 cultures. Its results showed that preferences for lighter rather than darker skin color were evident in 92% of societies. Surprisingly, across all twelve Black African societies of the sub-Saharan region, people demonstrated similar preferences. It was a preference for lighter skin color.

It is possible that such a perception of lighter skin as more physically attractive could be due to evolutionary origins because African people of that time might not have had much exposure to white people's images. Surprisingly, the priming and mere exposure effects of black relatives and tribal neighbors did not have much influence on the preferences in those presumably homogeneous societies (Van den Berge & Frost, 1986).

These preferences for light skin color could be explained by the evolution of sexual reproduction. The light skin color could function as an evolutionary neonate cue of infancy and youth. This preference for

light skin could also stem from social learning and the widespread White standards of beauty in social media.

A recent study of young people in 26 middle- and emerging-income countries across Africa, Asia, and the Americas (with more than 19 thousand participants) showed that light skin preferences were still prevalent across the world. As a result, people are increasingly turning to skin lighteners (Peltzer et al., 2016).

Cultural Preferences for Skin Tone in America

Results of another study, conducted in the multicultural society of the United States, were more supportive of priming, the mere exposure effect, and social learning. Researchers found that African American, Anglo-American, and Mexican American children of a younger age perceived the others in each ethnic group as similarly attractive. However, the older children from each cultural group perceived people from their own ethnic group as more attractive than people from other ethnic groups (Langlois & Stephan, 1977).

Several other studies investigated skin color preferences in ratings of attractiveness in the USA (e.g., Cunningham et al., 1995; Neal and Wilson, 1989; Udry et al., 1971; Van den Berge & Frost, 1986).

Cultural Preferences for Light Skin Tone

Across several studies, White, Black, Asian Americans preferred women with lighter skin colors. For example, White and Black Americans perceive women with lighter skin colors as more attractive than those with darker skin colors (Neal and Wilson, 1989; Udry et al.,1971).

However, these effects of skin color on perceptions of attractiveness were not very strong. Researchers suggested that this preference for lighter skin color in women could be partially due to its cultural association with a youthful appearance (Cunningham et al., 1995).

Social Media Promotes the Light Beautiful Skin

Recent studies have confirmed that many people still prefer light skin tones over dark skin tones (e.g., Baumann, 2008; Meyers, 2011).

Many people believe that lighter skin tones are more beautiful. This effect might be due to the fact that magazines and advertisements tend to represent Whites more often than Blacks on their pages. Thus, the role of colorism is still pervasive in society, where widespread messages imply that lighter skin tones are symbolic of attractiveness. However, preferences appear to have shifted recently from fair and medium white skin to olive skin tone. Brown and black skin colors are still less popular in their representations.

In the United States, such preferences stem from the country's history since slavery times, when people's skin tones created segregated cultures. A person's lighter skin tone was often associated with being privileged and intelligently Caucasian (European American), in comparison to the darker skin associated with being aggressive and unintelligently African American. For women of both races, lighter skin tones were associated with the ideal of purity and innocence, while dark skin tones were associated with unclean and tainted images (Baumann, 2008).

BEAUTIFUL SKIN COLOR PREFERENCES IN INTERCULTURAL RELATIONSHIPS

Skin color and other racial features play roles in physical attraction between men and women in the context of interracial relationships.

Despite widely documented preferences for lighter skin, many people prefer mating partners of the same race. They prefer to select those who appear familiar and similar to them (see another article here).

A former student once asked me,

> *"Is it preference or prejudice if a white woman prefers a white man over a black man for a dating relationship?"*

How do we tell the difference between preference and prejudice in such delicate aspects of interpersonal relationships?

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