

The Diversity of Love Journal

Women and Men Who Are Physically Attractive in Different Cultures

Article published on [February 6, 2022](#) by [Victor Karandashev](#)

Retrieved from: <https://love-diversity.org/what-about-your-partners-physical-appearance-attracts-you/>

People tend to love physically attractive women and men in interpersonal relationships. They are more likely to fall in love with those who are beautiful and have a physically attractive appearance. Interpersonal perception in a relationship is multisensory in its physical nature: not only visual but also auditory, tactile-kinesthetic, and olfactory.

Multisensory Perception in a Romantic Relationship

A lover admires a loved one's physical traits as seen through multiple sensory impressions, including visual, auditory, tactile-kinesthetic, olfactory, and gustatory. Multisensory processes occur in the partner's interaction and their interpersonal perception. These various sensory impressions are intricately intertwined (see for review, [Karandashev et al., 2016, 2020](#)).

Men and women not only look at their partners but also speak, listen, and smile. They stay in close proximity, dance with them, touch them,

hug them, and are hugged, cuddling and kissing each other. Such dynamic, expressive behavior often affects attraction more than static facial appearance and body shape.

People's attention to different modalities of physical appearance and expressive behavior in potential partners varies across cultures. Aside from visual preferences in judging another person, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic, and olfactory sensory modalities, as well as expressive behavior, all contribute to mating attraction. These preferences in a partner differ across cultures, particularly between traditional and modern societies ([Karandashev et al., 2016; 2020](#)).

Recent Cross-cultural Studies of Sensory Preferences in Different Countries

Studies in societies with varying social, economic, and cultural parameters (2740 participants from 10 cultural regions in six countries) revealed that general differences in sensory preferences in romantic attraction exist between societies of different degrees of modernization ([Karandashev et al., 2016; 2020](#)).

The main conclusions of those studies are:

“Biologically determined sensory parameters are more important in less modernized countries—with priorities of survival values, whereas socially determined sensory parameters are more important in more modernized countries—with priorities of self-expression values. This general tendency, however, is not always straight.”

([Karandashev et al., 2020](#))

How Do Traditional and Modernized Societies Differ?

Inglehart and his colleagues have proposed a modernization theory of society. The theory characterizes societies as having different degrees of modernization based on economic, social, and cultural characteristics ([Inglehart, 1997](#); [Inglehart & Baker, 2000](#); [Inglehart & Welzel, 2005](#)).

The theory of modernization presents an important framework to explain the cultural evolution across societies in historical perspective. Conventionally, we can distinguish *traditional* and *modern* cultures along the spectrum of modernization. Traditional societies' cultural norms place a high priority on survival values, whereas modern societies' cultural norms place a high value on self-expression values (see more, [Karandashev, 2021, section 2.8](#)).

Cultural Values and Social Norms of Traditional Societies

In traditional (less modernized) societies, cultural values and social norms respect group cohesion, societal structure, and customary norms. They encourage collectivistic values. These societies are conservative. They discourage emancipation and individualistic self-expression.

Traditional (less modernized) societies are those in which the cultural values of Survival, greater Power distance, lower Individualism, lower Indulgence, and lower Emancipative values prevail.

Cultural Values and Social Norms of Modern Societies

In modern (more modernized) societies, cultural values and social norms are less conservative.

- They are flexible and fluid, providing relative freedom to follow societal norms;

- They encourage individualistic values;
- They respect emancipation and individualism;
- They are open to diversity in self-expression.

Modern (or more modernized) societies are those in which the cultural values of Self-expression, lower Power Distance, high value of Individualism, Indulgence, and Emancipation prevail.

What Physical Characteristics Are Attractive in Traditional Cultures?

In less modernized countries, the sensory preferences in romantic attraction between partners are focused on the physical qualities of a mate: body shape, facial features, skin texture, and the quality of smell, which are stable biologically and vital for evolution. These sensory qualities have a higher value, indicating that mates are in good health.

For example, in Portugal and Russia, where the indices of Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance are high, people place a higher value on such traits of their romantic partners as body, skin, and smell, compared to the participants in countries where these indices are low, such as the US.

Participants from Jamaica and Russia, whose cultures are characterized by a low value of Egalitarianism and a high cultural value of Hierarchy, pay less attention to the eyes and voices of their mates ([Karandashev et al., 2020](#)).

What Physical Characteristics Are Attractive in Modern Cultures?

People in modern individualistic and egalitarian societies, on the other hand, care less about how physically attractive their partners are. For instance, they know how to mask or modify odors by taking showers and applying perfumes. They often know how to manipulate physical characteristics and appearances through deliberate deception.

In more modernized countries, the sensory preferences in the love attraction of partners are focused on such expressive behaviors as facial expressions, expressive behavior, dress, dance, etc. Body movement, dress, hair style, cosmetics, facial expression, and gestures are the qualities that are more adaptable and changeable due to cultural norms ([Karandashev et al., 2020](#)).

Participants in modern societies with the lower cultural value of Hierarchy and the higher cultural value of Egalitarianism—such as France and Portugal—pay more attention to the eyes and voice of a partner as the expressive vehicles of their partner’s personality.

In modern societies with a higher value of Egalitarianism and a lower cultural value of Hierarchy, such as France and Portugal, participants pay more attention to a partner’s eyes and voice since they serve as signals expressing their partner’s personality ([Karandashev et al., 2020](#)).

Men’s and Women’s Sensory Preferences Across Cultures

Many men’s and women’s preferences for physical characteristics in a partner are very similar, with only minor differences. Among those, such sensory qualities as perception of body shape, senses of smell and lips, facial expressiveness, smiling, and expressive speaking.

Men also rated the importance of their partner’s sensory impressions higher than women. Generally, when gender differences were

statistically significant, men valued the importance of their romantic partner's sensory qualities higher than women did ([Karandashev et al., 2020](#)).

This conclusion converges with the earlier findings, which showed that men have higher expectations of the qualities of female physical appeal than women do (see for review, [Regan et al., 2000](#)).

Here are other articles of interest on the topic:

- [Genetic secrets of love attraction](#)
- [Genetic diversity and love attraction](#)
- [Sexual preferences for physical attractiveness](#)
- [What's an Ideal Age Difference in Dating?](#)
- [Physical Beauty of Men and Women Across Cultures](#)
- [What is beautiful is culturally good](#)

References

Inglehart, R. (1997). *Modernization and postmodernization: Cultural, economic, and political change in 43 societies*. Princeton University Press.

Inglehart, R., & Baker, W. E. (2000). [Modernization, cultural change, and the persistence of traditional values](#). *American Sociological Review*, 65(1), 19–51.

Inglehart, R., & Welzel, C. (2005). *Modernization, cultural change, and democracy: The human development sequence*. Cambridge University Press.

Karandashev, V., Zarubko, E., Artemyeva, V. Neto, F. Surmanidze, L., & Feybesse, C. (2016). [Sensory values in romantic attraction in four Europeans countries: gender and cross-cultural comparison](#). *Cross-Cultural Research*, 50 (5), 478-504.

Karandashev, V., Evans, N., Zarubko, E., Neto, F., Evans, M., Artemeva, V., . . . Surmanidze, L. (2020). [Physical Attraction Scale — Short Version: Cross-Cultural Validation](#). *Journal of Relationships Research*, 11, E17.

Regan, P. C., Levin, L., Gate, R., Sprecher, S., & Christopher, F. S. (2000). [Partner preferences: What characteristics do men and women desire in their short-term sexual and long-term romantic partners?](#) *Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality*, 12(3), 1–21.

See other articles on related topics in the rubrics of [equality](#), [love attraction](#), [physical beauty](#), [sexual attractiveness](#).