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Trade-offs between markers of absolute and relative quality in human facial preferences

Short title: Trade-offs in human facial preferences

Individuals are attuned to cues of quality in potential mates. Mate quality is assessed on both an absolute scale, independent of the observer, and also on a relative scale, dependent upon attributes of the observer. Much research has focused on how individuals respond to either absolute or relative quality in mate choice, but how these dimensions are weighted during mate choice decisions is poorly understood and has recently attracted much theoretical interest. Here we examine the interplay between women's facial preferences for a measure of absolute quality (sexual dimorphism) and one of relative quality (self-similarity). Women rated the attractiveness of male faces that had been simultaneously manipulated along the dimensions of masculinity and

self-similarity in short-term and long-term relationship contexts. Sexual dimorphism had a greater positive effect on ratings than self-similarity, and masculinity and self-similarity had positive combinative effects on ratings of attractiveness. Women's co-expressed preferences for masculine faces combined with their lesser preference for subtly self-similar faces may reflect selection of good genes, promote optimal outbreeding, and give rise to directional selection even in the presence of a general self-similarity preference.

Key words: attractiveness; face preference; facial masculinity; genetic compatibility; mate choice; self-similarity

1 Successful mate choice necessitates the accurate assessment of quality in a potential  
2 partner. Yet this assessment entails a paradox. Quality can be defined both with  
3 reference to an absolute scale that can be measured independently of the observer,  
4 such as ornamental indicator traits demonstrating good genes; and also on a relative  
5 scale that cannot be assessed without consideration of the traits of the observer, such  
6 as genetic compatibility (Neff and Pitcher, 2005). Potential mates are likely to score  
7 differently on the two scales, and the question of how individuals trade off absolute  
8 and relative quality in mate selection is of key interest to biologists but has been little  
9 investigated (Colegrave et al., 2002; Mays and Hill, 2004; Roberts and Little, 2008)  
10 beyond an initial study in mice (Roberts and Gosling, 2003).

11 Mays and Hill (2004) identify different scenarios that might describe how individuals  
12 trade off absolute and relative quality. Firstly, individuals might privilege absolute or  
13 relative quality dependent upon social, ecological or genetic context, with reference to  
14 genetic diversity within the population, for instance. Alternatively, individuals might  
15 employ a nested, hierarchical rule, whereby potential mates will only be assessed with  
16 regards to relative quality if they exceed a certain threshold on the measure of  
17 absolute quality. Both of these scenarios have been demonstrated in mice (Roberts  
18 and Gosling, 2003). Finally, individuals might employ different criteria for social mates  
19 compared with extra-pair mates, as has been demonstrated in passerine birds (review  
20 in Mays and Hill, 2004). Humans represent an ideal model to study this trade-off  
21 because preferences for absolute and relative quality may be addressed using facial  
22 features (Roberts and Little, 2008). The distinction between social and extra-pair mates

23 can be approximated in humans by asking individuals to evaluate others for a short-  
24 term compared with a long-term relationship (see e.g. Gangestad and Simpson, 2000).

25 In humans, sexual dimorphism is considered an indicator trait of absolute quality. Male  
26 masculinity is associated with perceived healthiness (Rhodes et al., 2003; Rhodes et al.,  
27 2007) and actual health (Rhodes et al., 2003; Thornhill and Gangestad, 2006), lower  
28 levels of fluctuating asymmetry (another indicator trait) (Little et al., 2008), and higher  
29 levels of testosterone (Penton-Voak and Chen, 2004), which may constitute an index of  
30 'good genes' (Zahavi, 1975, 1977; Hamilton and Zuk, 1982; Maynard Smith, 1985;  
31 Folstad and Karter, 1992). The manipulation of male facial masculinity in digital images  
32 and the attendant implicit effects on the mate quality of the stimulus have been  
33 greatly used to examine how women respond to the quality of a potential partner.  
34 Relatively more masculine male faces seem to be preferred when good gene benefits  
35 might be most relevant, such as when a woman is most likely to become pregnant  
36 (review in Jones et al., 2008), or when she makes judgments for a short-term  
37 relationship (where lasting benefits may be limited to those associated with  
38 conception) compared with a long-term relationship (where lasting benefits may  
39 derive from additional partner characteristics) (Penton-Voak et al., 1999a; Little et al.,  
40 2002; Penton-Voak et al., 2003).

41 Alongside preferences for absolute traits, humans also assess the facial attractiveness  
42 of potential partners with reference to the relative measure of self-similarity. Couples  
43 exhibit physical similarity (overviews and research in e.g. Griffiths and Kunz, 1973;  
44 Zajonc et al., 1987; Bereczkei et al., 2002; Little et al., 2003; Bereczkei et al., 2004;

45 Little et al., 2006) and the experimental manipulation of facial similarity generally  
46 indicates that visual similarity to the rater enhances attractiveness to some degree  
47 (Penton-Voak et al., 1999b; DeBruine, 2004; DeBruine et al., 2005; Bailenson et al.,  
48 2006). This relative preference may have indirect benefits: since facial resemblance is  
49 associated with relatedness, it may enable optimal outbreeding (Bateson, 1978, 1980,  
50 1982) and influence inbreeding depression (Potts and Wakeland, 1993). Similarly, it  
51 may encourage the selection of a partner from the same population who is more likely  
52 to have appropriate adaptations to the local environment, thereby enabling the  
53 maintenance of co-adapted genetic complexes (Read and Harvey, 1991), or enhance  
54 one's own genetic representation in future generations through the selection of a  
55 partner with some genetic matches (Thiessen and Gregg, 1980; Epstein and Guttman,  
56 1982; Rushton, 1988; Thiessen, 1999). Recent work has suggested that genotype at the  
57 major histocompatibility complex (MHC) can be discerned through facial shape,  
58 providing a pathway for assortative mating at the genetic level (Roberts et al., 2005;  
59 Roberts and Little, 2008). In addition, a preference for own-phenotype resemblance  
60 could provide direct benefits, by enhancing trusting relationships within a partnership  
61 (DeBruine, 2002, 2005; DeBruine et al., 2008; Krupp et al., 2008), or leading women to  
62 seek out supportive kin during pregnancy (DeBruine et al., 2005; DeBruine et al., 2008;  
63 Jones et al., 2008).

64 The present study examines the interaction between cues of absolute and relative  
65 mate quality on human mating preferences. Sixty Caucasian women rated men's faces  
66 that had been manipulated simultaneously to represent two levels (masculinized and

67 feminized) of sexual dimorphism (absolute quality) and two levels (self-similar and self-  
68 dissimilar) of self-similarity (relative quality) for both short-term and long-term  
69 relationships.

70

## 71 METHODS

72 All stimuli images were created on the basis of neutral-expression photographs taken  
73 under standardized lighting conditions of white individuals aged 18 - 25 with no  
74 spectacles or beards. Photographs were standardized in size with reference to pupil  
75 position, and manually marked around the main features (e.g. eyes, nose and mouth)  
76 and the outline of each face (e.g. jawline and hairline) using dedicated software  
77 (Tiddeman et al., 2001). Twenty-four photographs of men were grouped into sets of  
78 four images. For each set of four images, the average location of each point in each  
79 face was calculated, and the faces of each group were morphed to this average shape.  
80 Next, the four images in each group were superimposed to produce a photographic-  
81 quality composite image. This technique has been used to create composite images in  
82 previous studies (see Benson and Perrett, 1993; Tiddeman et al., 2001; Little and  
83 Hancock, 2002). These six composite images were used as the base faces for the  
84 stimuli.

85 Sixty Caucasian women aged 16 – 39 (mean  $\pm$  SD = 23  $\pm$  5 yrs) were recruited from  
86 amongst university students and social contacts for a study on perceptions of  
87 attractiveness; participants were not told the specific study hypotheses. Half of the



88 women were users of hormonal contraceptives and half were normally-cycling. Each  
89 was photographed directly facing the camera with a neutral expression.

90 A unique set of 24 male facial stimuli was created for each rater. Sexual dimorphism  
91 was transformed on the basis of two composite images, one derived from 50  
92 symmetrized male photographs and one from 50 symmetrized female photographs.  
93 The linear shape difference between the two composites was used to create two new  
94 images from each of the six base faces. One image was transformed 50% towards the  
95 female composite shape, and the other was transformed 50% towards the male  
96 composite shape, following previous methods (see Benson and Perrett, 1991; Perrett  
97 et al., 1998; Tiddeman et al., 2001). Image colors were not changed from the originals.  
98 The transform thus gave rise to 12 images, composed of two images (one feminized  
99 and one masculinized) for each of the six base faces.

100 Following previous methodology (Penton-Voak et al., 1999b; DeBruine, 2002, 2004),  
101 facial self-similarity was manipulated using the linear shape difference between  
102 feature points in the shape composite of 50 symmetrized female photographs against  
103 each participant's own particular shape. Two new images were created from each of  
104 the 12 images described above. One image was created by transforming the shape  
105 25% towards the participant's own particular shape. The other image was created by  
106 transforming the shape 25% towards the female composite image. Since the  
107 participant's image may be more or less feminine than average, this self-similarity  
108 transformation does not have systematic effects on facial sexual dimorphism. This  
109 transform was applied uniquely to the 12 faces described above for each participant.

110 The final stimuli then constituted 24 faces for each female: six base faces by two levels  
111 of sexual dimorphism (feminized and masculinized) by two levels of self-similarity (self-  
112 dissimilar and self-similar) (see supplementary data, diagram 1). Images were masked  
113 on the outline of the face so that hair and clothing cues were not visible. Image colors  
114 were not changed from the originals.

115 A transform of 50% sexual dimorphism was chosen so the images were still  
116 perceptually male when feminized, and because this size of transform has been used in  
117 many previous studies of the effects of sexual dimorphism on face preference and is  
118 known to affect judgments of attractiveness (Perrett et al., 1998; Penton-Voak et al.,  
119 1999a). A transform of 25% self-similarity was chosen in the aim of creating  
120 approximate perceptual equivalence with the 50% sexual dimorphism manipulation.

121 There is more possible variability in the face shape of any one individual compared  
122 with the possible variability in the face shape of an average male or average female,  
123 meaning that a 50% transform towards or away from self-similarity could result in  
124 greater differences than a 50% transform along a sexual dimorphism continuum. These  
125 manipulations are demonstrated in the supplementary data, diagram 2.

126 Each woman rated the attractiveness of her unique set of face stimuli separately for  
127 short-term and long-term relationships. Women were told that a short-term  
128 relationship might include a date or holiday romance, and a long-term relationship  
129 might include marriage or shared parenting. Ratings were provided on a 7-point scale  
130 anchored by the verbal descriptors 'unattractive' and 'very attractive'. Images were  
131 presented in a random order. Four of the women were unavailable to come to the

132 laboratory and carried out ratings online; the remainder carried out the ratings at the  
133 laboratory. Following the collection of ratings, women were interviewed regarding  
134 their conception of the study hypotheses. Around a third of the participants suggested  
135 that the faces were used to investigate responses to face manipulations, including size,  
136 shape and masculinity manipulations. No-one suggested that the faces had been  
137 manipulated to resemble the rater.

138 If the study population were systematically more or less attractive than the population  
139 used to create the base faces, then this could systematically bias ratings towards or  
140 away from the self-similar faces. To test this, 20 independent female raters rated the  
141 attractiveness of the six composite faces that had been manipulated 25% towards or  
142 25% away from an average face made from the study population. There were no  
143 significant difference between the mean ratings of the six faces manipulated 25%  
144 towards compared with those manipulated 25% away (paired samples t-tests; short  
145 term relationship ratings:  $t_{19} = 0.27, p = .790$ ; long term relationship ratings:  $t_{19} = .32, p$   
146  $= .756$ ).

147 Analysis was carried out in SPSS 15.0.

## 148 RESULTS

149

150 Repeated-measures ANOVA (2 x relationship term, 2 x sexual dimorphism, 2 x self-  
151 similarity) revealed significant main effects of sexual dimorphism and self-similarity,  
152 reflecting that masculinized faces were rated significantly more attractive than  
153 feminized faces ( $F_{1,59} = 19.39, p < .001; r = .50$ ) and that self-similar faces were rated

154 significantly more attractive than self-dissimilar ( $F_{1,59} = 4.50, p = .038; r = .27$ ).

155 However, these significant main effects were modified by two significant interactions.

156 First, there was an interaction between relationship term and self-similarity ratings

157 ( $F_{1,59} = 4.48, p = .039$ ) (Figure 1). Among self-dissimilar faces (2 x relationship term, 2 x

158 sexual dimorphism), relationship term was not significant ( $F_{1,59} = .08, p = .784$ ), while

159 among self-similar faces, there was a non-significant trend for faces to be given higher

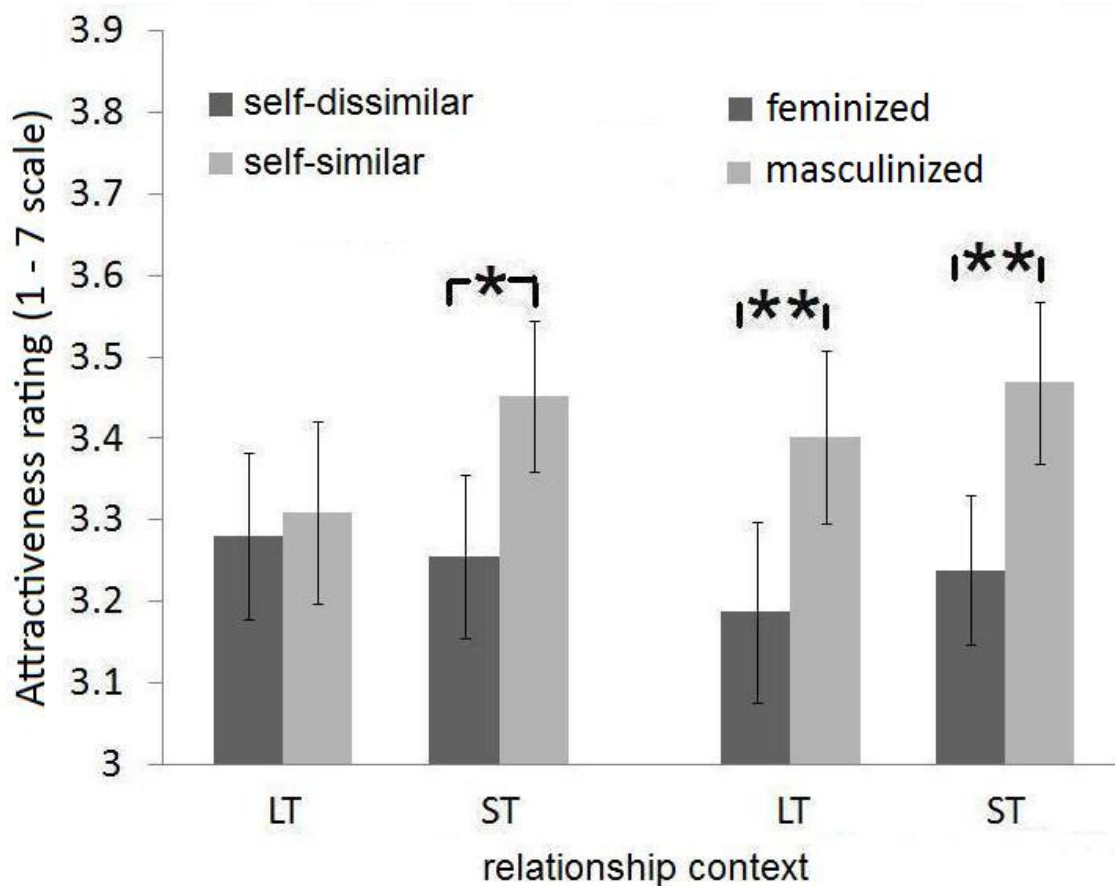
160 ratings in the short-term compared with long-term context ( $F_{1,59} = 3.43, p = .069$ ).

161 There was no significant effect of self-similarity in long-term relationship ratings (2 x

162 sexual dimorphism, 2 x self-similarity;  $F_{1,59} = .26, p = .615$ ), while in short-term

163 relationship ratings self-similar faces were rated significantly more attractive than self-

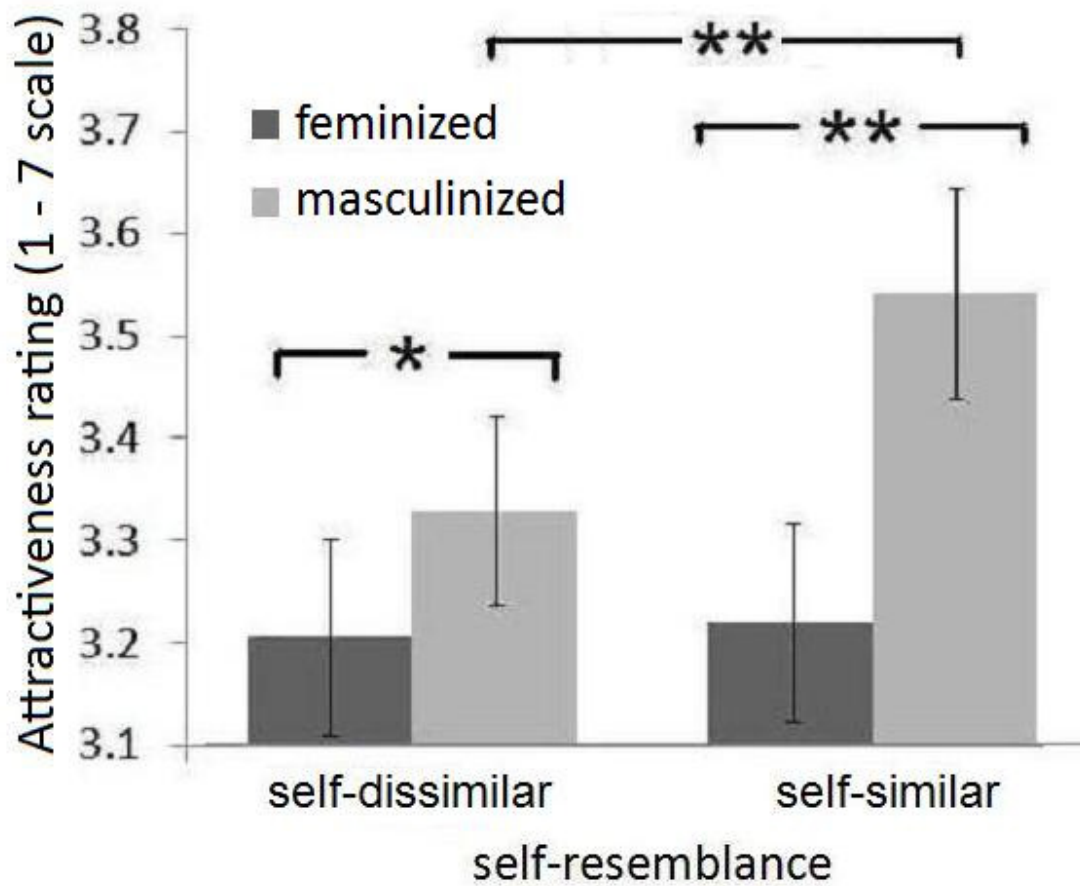
164 dissimilar ( $F_{1,59} = 6.90, p = .011$ ).



165  
 166 Figure 1. The effects of self-similarity and sexual dimorphism for short-term (ST) and  
 167 long-term (LT) relationship ratings. Bars = mean rating  $\pm$  SE; \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

168

169 Second, there was a significant interaction between sexual dimorphism and self-  
 170 similarity ( $F_{1,59} = 8.86, p = .004$ ) (Figure 2). Masculinized faces were rated significantly  
 171 more attractive than feminized faces in both self-dissimilar ( $F_{1,59} = 4.52, p = .038$ ) and  
 172 self-similar faces ( $F_{1,59} = 26.67, p < .001$ ). However, self-similarity was rated  
 173 significantly more attractive amongst masculinized faces ( $F_{1,59} = 9.87, p = .003$ ) but  
 174 not amongst feminized faces ( $F_{1,59} = .07, p = .800$ ).



175

176 Figure 2. The effects of sexual dimorphism for each level of self-similarity (left panel)  
 177 and the effects of self-similarity for each level of sexual dimorphism (right panel),  
 178 collapsing together short-term and long-term relationship ratings. Bars = mean rating  
 179  $\pm$  SE; \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

180

181 There was no interaction between relationship term and sexual dimorphism ( $F_{1,59} =$   
 182  $.03, p = .861$ ).

183 DISCUSSION

184 The women rated masculinized faces as more attractive than feminized faces, and self-  
185 similar faces as more attractive than self-dissimilar faces. Absolute quality (sexual  
186 dimorphism) had greater influence on ratings than relative quality (self-similarity). This  
187 was apparent from a comparison of the effect sizes, the statistical significance of the  
188 effects, and also in the consistency of effects across relationship contexts and across  
189 levels of self-similarity or sexual dimorphism.

190 The findings support predictions by Mays and Hill (2004) for a hierarchical, nested rule  
191 underlying preference trade-offs. That is, our results suggest that the faces were first  
192 assessed for their absolute quality (their masculinity); only faces which were high in  
193 absolute quality (i.e. masculinized faces) were evaluated for relative quality (self-  
194 similarity). Masculinized faces were always rated more attractive than feminized faces;  
195 in contrast, self-similarity only significantly increased ratings of attractiveness in  
196 masculinized and not feminized faces (Figure 2). These findings reflect results in mice,  
197 where females prefer to mate with high-status males as determined by androgen-  
198 dependent urinary odor cues (i.e. absolute quality), and only base their choices on a  
199 relative scale, MHC dissimilarity, when there is very little variation in the genetic  
200 quality of the males, or when there is large variation between the males in the extent  
201 of their MHC dissimilarity (Roberts and Gosling, 2003).

202 The interaction between masculinity and self-similarity also has a possible bearing  
203 upon human mate choice strategies. It has been argued that masculine men may not  
204 be a viable partner option for most women because they are highly sought after (Little  
205 et al., 2001; Penton-Voak et al., 2003; Scott et al., 2008). Yet where both partners have

206 a vested interest in a relationship (for example, by resemblance to each other), this  
207 may limit the marketplace, and open up opportunity for women of lower quality to  
208 partner more masculine men. Alternatively, or in addition, when faces are perceived as  
209 attractive (here, because they are masculinized), self-similarity may become more  
210 important. Further, masculinized faces that are usually avoided on the basis that they  
211 are associated with negative personality traits such as dishonesty (Perrett et al., 1998)  
212 may become attractive with increased self-similarity due to the pro-social traits  
213 attributed to a self-similar face (review in DeBruine et al., 2008) including, in particular,  
214 trustworthiness (DeBruine, 2002, 2005).

215 It has been noted previously that the use of cues of both absolute and relative mate  
216 quality in mate choice may constitute a mechanism to maintain variance in mate  
217 choice relevant traits, even in the presence of directional selection (Roberts and  
218 Gosling, 2003; Neff and Pitcher, 2005). In humans, although greater emphasis appears  
219 to be placed on masculinity than self-similarity in judgments of attractiveness, the  
220 combinative effect of self-similarity and masculinity that we demonstrate would likely  
221 help to maintain variance in relative levels of facial masculinity.

222 The finding that self-similarity did not increase ratings of attractiveness in feminized  
223 faces might help explain the discrepancy with previous findings that manipulated self-  
224 resemblance has a neutral or non-significant positive effect on attractiveness ratings  
225 where facial masculinity was not simultaneously manipulated (Penton-Voak et al.,  
226 1999b; DeBruine, 2005). It should be noted that there was some discrepancy between  
227 the preferences of our raters and raters in previous studies. Our raters did not exhibit



228 the preference for masculinity in the context of short-term relationships compared  
229 with long-term relationships that has been demonstrated previously (Little et al., 2002;  
230 Penton-Voak et al., 2003).

231 Mating context (short-term or long-term relationships) also affected evaluations of  
232 attractiveness, with self-similarity significantly increasing ratings of attractiveness in  
233 short-term but not long-term relationships (Figure 1). Our findings contrast with  
234 previous findings that self-similarity is aversive in ratings of facial attractiveness in a  
235 short-term relationship context (DeBruine, 2005), or at the high-fertility phase of the  
236 menstrual cycle (DeBruine et al., 2005), both contexts when genetic quality is thought  
237 to be privileged (Roberts and Little, 2008). Reasons for the discrepancy could be due to  
238 our simultaneous manipulations of masculinity, or to differences in the rating  
239 procedure or degree of facial manipulation. The current study used manipulations of  
240 25% self-similarity, whereas previous work has manipulated faces to greater degrees  
241 of self-similarity. Our participants gave higher ratings to 25% self-similarity than 25%  
242 self-dissimilarity, suggestive of a preference for subtle resemblance and consistent  
243 with optimal outbreeding (Bateson, 1978, 1980, 1982). Previous work suggests that  
244 there is an asymptotic rather than linear function of own-phenotype resemblance on  
245 attractiveness ratings (Penton-Voak et al., 1999b). Our manipulation of 25% self-  
246 similarity was chosen to create approximate perceptual equivalence in the difference  
247 between high and low self-similarity compared with the difference between feminized  
248 and masculinized faces (see Methods, and supplementary data diagram 2). However,  
249 the greater effect size of the masculinity manipulation may suggest that the sexually

250 dimorphic transforms were more salient. Future work might look to investigate the  
251 impact of different proportions of self-similarity, and also the effect of individual  
252 differences amongst the raters on the interaction between sexual dimorphism and  
253 self-similarity manipulations.

254 In sum, our results constitute the first examination of the trade-offs of absolute and  
255 relative quality in human preferences, and as such provide insights into the dynamics  
256 underlying the mate choice process. Overall these data demonstrate a sophisticated  
257 system of preferences, whereby absolute and relative quality is assessed in faces, and  
258 which may simultaneously allow for selection of good genes and the promotion of  
259 optimal outbreeding.

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265

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