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Attraction to Costly Signals in Facial Features

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Studies have used manipulated faces to test the preferences of heterosexual individuals for sexually dimorphic facial cues. Sexually dimorphic facial cues are hypothesized to be costly to produce, and the signals that they provide have been found to attract individuals with specific mating motivations. In contrast to previous studies, which have excluded homosexual participants, we directly compared homosexual and heterosexual male and female preferences for manipulated sexual dimorphism in faces (homosexual males: $n = 311$; heterosexual males: $n = 215$; homosexual females: $n = 159$; heterosexual females: $n = 218$). Prior studies suggest that homosexual men prefer men whose behavior is more masculine than feminine, and that homosexual women demonstrate no preference for either masculinity or femininity in women. In our study, we tested for similarities and differences among heterosexual and homosexual males and females with regard to their preferences for a costly signal: sexual dimorphism of face shape. Homosexual men demonstrated stronger preferences for masculinity in male faces than did all of the other groups. Homosexual women demonstrated stronger preferences for masculinity in female faces than did heterosexual women. These results suggest attractiveness judgments of same-sex faces made by homosexual individuals are not a mirror image of those made by heterosexual individuals of the opposite sex. Our data suggest that face preferences of homosexual individuals reflect a system of biologically and socially guided preferences at least as complex as those found among heterosexual individuals.

Aaron Glassenberg completed his master's degree at Harvard University in Social Psychology where his research focused on attraction. His master's thesis explored differences in facial attraction patterns between gay and straight men and women. Aaron is currently a PhD student in organizational behavior, offered jointly with the Harvard Psychology department and Harvard Business School.