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Effect of the Act of Reading on Perceived Physical Attractiveness

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Abstract

Recent research has attempted to prove that the physical act of reading is the single greatest factor in increasing an individual's romantic desirability. Evolutionary psychologists have found that when individuals – both male and female – are looking for a prospective mate, they overwhelmingly rank the subjects viewed in the act of reading as the most physically appealing. Researchers posit that it is the physical action of reading that elicits this response, refuting earlier claims that the appeal was a pheromone-like side-effect of the chemical mixture of ink on treated paper. However, studies have shown that ratings of physical attractiveness seem to rise proportionately to the thickness of the book the subject is holding, with any paperback over 2.5 inches (or 3.5 inches hardcover) (i.e., approximately 650 pages) prompting respondents to rank the subject at the highest possible level of attraction.

Keywords: attraction, sexuality, adornment, halo effect, phenotype

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It has long been implicitly accepted in literate societies that individuals who read books are viewed as especially valuable members of society, specifically as competent employees and dedicated citizens. But a growing body of research is aimed at identifying why competition for readers is consistently higher than for non-readers when individuals seek a romantic partner. This fact is no surprise to evolutionary biologists, most notably Orson (2014) who explains that “those who read recreationally have larger frontal lobes, the area of the brain controlling problem-solving and empathy, thus making them, from an evolutionary standpoint, very desirable potential mates” (p. 704). This physiological phenomenon has also been identified in female apes observing male apes in various states of pensiveness. However, recent research suggests that the arousal of romantic desire is linked not to the reader, but to the very act of reading itself (Carver & Paley, 2012; O'Connor, 2011). Empirical studies have shown that individuals observed during the act of reading are rated as much more physically attractive than their non-reading counterparts, even those who exhibit the established hallmarks of physical attractiveness (e.g., beards and facial symmetry) (*Bibliophiles Unite*, 2015).

Using a Likert scale to rate physical attractiveness, Menley et al. (2014) found that all respondents – both male and female – rated an open book “held in one hand or two, or open on a lap with the subject's gaze downward” as the most alluring accessory, surpassing designer shoes and firefighter uniform (p. 326). These findings support an earlier study in which female participants consistently preferred the image of a male subject holding a book over that same male subject holding a baby and a puppy, respectively (Hopkins, 2005, as cited in Daniels et al., 2011).