

The internet influences what people think is attractive in others, according to new research

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A new study, by scientists at the University of St Andrews, found that people with access to the internet preferred more masculine men, and more feminine and thinner women.

This is the first time that researchers have compared the facial preferences of people with internet access to those without access in the same country.

As a result, the new findings suggest that the internet – and most likely media portrayals of certain 'types' – is associated with what people think is attractive.

The research, published this week by the journal *PLOS ONE*, was carried out by psychologists Carlota Batres and Professor David Perrett of the Perception Lab at St Andrews.

Carlota Batres, who led the study, commented, "One possibility for the difference is the level of media exposure: people with internet access are more exposed to the media (adverts or websites), which promotes the beauty ideals of muscly men and thin [feminine women](#)."

As a recent example, the researchers cite the Hollywood blockbuster movie, 'Noah', in which the male lead is played by the masculine actor Russell Crowe and the female lead is played by the feminine and thin actress Jennifer Connelly.

The research was carried out in person in the Latin American country of El Salvador, where a substantial percentage (74%) of the population does not have access to the internet.

Miss Batres continued, "Our findings suggest that existing online studies may provide a distorted perspective of the populations in developing countries. Our data provide evidence that, even within a small country, sub-sectors of the population have different preferences.

"Future research should take this into account when studies are made in countries where a substantial portion of the population does not have internet access."

The study involved participants choosing between pictures of people higher or lower in weight, or higher or lower in masculinity and femininity. Testing was done in person in communities where internet use was common or rare.

The researchers found that there was no difference at all in the preferences of those with access to the internet, whether they were tested online or in person. Almost exclusively, they preferred the faces that the internet might suggest are more 'attractive'.

However, non-internet users found feminine men and masculine, heavier women more attractive.

The study found that participants with [internet access](#) were more likely to have a television in their home, which exposes them even further to the media through commercials, television shows, and movies.

The researchers say that there are several explanations for their findings, including economic circumstances influencing perceived attractiveness.

Professor Perrett explained, "One possibility is that the harshness of the environment may influence face preferences. People without internet in the El Salvador study had fewer resources – such as no running water - and such harshness may be responsible for what they find attractive.

"When income and access to food is uncertain, heavier women may be better equipped to survive and reproduce and therefore preferences for heavier women could be adaptive. Our findings are consistent with previous literature that has found that heavier figures are considered more attractive in poorer and rural areas."

Professor Perrett, who runs the Perception Lab at St Andrews, added, "We take the internet for granted, yet in much of the world there is a "digital divide" that separates people living with and without luxuries, so it should not be surprising that people in very different circumstances have different priorities for qualities in a spouse."

Take part in similar experiments [online](#).

More information: Batres C, Perrett DI (2014)

"The Influence of the Digital Divide on Face Preferences in El Salvador: People without Internet Access Prefer More Feminine Men, More Masculine Women, and Women with Higher Adiposity." *PLoS ONE* 9(7): e100966. [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0100966](#)

Provided by University of St Andrews

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