Assortative Friendship: Similarity Between Female Same-Sex Friends in Face and Body
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Introduction
An evolutionary perspective suggests that men and women should ally themselves with those who facilitate their own goals. In the context of mate search, men and women should ally themselves with those who can provide information about the opposite sex, and who can function as mate-seeking partners. Because attractiveness is a key determinant of women’s desirability to men (Buss, 2005), women’s mate-search goals may be better attained by affiliating with women of similar levels of attractiveness. Under this logic, women should develop same-sex friendships with women who are neither much less attractive than themselves (those women discourage male attention) nor much more attractive than themselves (those women steal male attention). In fact, previous research has demonstrated that female friends are rated as similarly attractive (Bleske-Rechek & Lighthall, 2010). It is possible, however, that female friends are similar in the cues they take in their appearance, or in the degree to which they display their attractiveness, than in their objective attractiveness. We designed a study to test that alternative explanation and to expand the existing evidence that emerging adult female friends attend on characteristics that are closely tied to mate search and acquisition: facial attractiveness, body attractiveness, and body shape.

Phase I: Female Friends
Each woman brought a same-sex friend to the lab. The typical pair had been friends for 19 months (SD = 41.01).

Across the 84 women in their original clothing, both facial attractiveness (partial \(r = .39\), \(p < .001\)) and body attractiveness (partial \(r = .33\), \(p < .001\)) were independent predictors of full-body attractiveness; face was a stronger independent predictor. We constructed 20 sets of random friendship pairs and analyzed them for similarity in sex-specific attractiveness variables. Those random friendship pairs were not similar in self-perception variables. These random friendship pairs were not similar in self-perceived attractiveness (mean \(r = .00\), \(p > .90\)) or any other self-perception variables.

Results
In the questionnaire, women reported their perceptions of their own physical attractiveness, popularity, humor, warmness, intelligence, athleticism, financial success, and ambition relative to other women. Across women, sexiness and physical attractiveness were highly correlated (\(r = .72\), \(p < .001\)), so we formulated a composite of the two, henceforth labeled “Self-Perceived Attractiveness.” As predicted, female friends were similar in self-perceived attractiveness (\(r = .39\), \(p < .05\)), but not similar in their other self-perceptions. Only athleticism approached significance (\(r = .24\), \(p > .15\)), as would be expected by similarity in their body shape (see below).

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Simplicity in Attractiveness as Judged by Outside Raters

In original clothes, female friends received similar ratings of their facial attractiveness, \(r(41) = .52\), \(p < .001\). Controlling for friendship duration, effort, and weight, partial \(r(41) = .39\), \(p < .001\). However, female friends did not receive similar ratings of their facial attractiveness, \(r(41) = .14\), \(p > .10\). Controlling for friendship duration and effort, partial \(r = .06\), \(p > .90\).

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Simplicity in Anthropometric Measurements Related to Attractiveness

Discussion
In this study we replicated recent findings from our lab that female friends are similar in both their self-reported attractiveness and “actual” attractiveness as judged by naïve raters (Bleske-Rechek & Lighthall, 2010). This research by documenting that female friends’ similarity in face and full-body attractiveness is not merely a function of the way they dress or appear often fits in with their appearances; rather, more, they were similar in their actual body shape and bust size, which are linked to females’ level of desirability in the mating market (Gitter, Lomaxz, Saxe, & Bat-Tal, 1987; Plank & Singh, 2010; Singh, 1983; Stinck & Fisher, 2006). Together with other research on assortment in same-sex friendship (see Feit, 1996, for a review), there is now substantial evidence that women friends are similar in specific physical attributes as well as in a variety of psychological attributes such as their interests and attitudes (including their sexual attitudes, Bleske-Rechek & Buss, 2006). There are presumably many benefits to having friends who are similar to themselves, such as familiarity, cognitive consistency, and help with attaining men’s goals. For example, if a woman aspires to enhance her social network, she might be well-served to ally with other women who are also pursuing that goal. Of course, with shared goals also comes competition for access to that goal if it is limited in supply. For example, women compete for access to men who are both desirable and willing to invest. Bias, having a friend who is even slightly more attractive might affect feelings of competition. In fact, other research (Bleske-Rechek & Lighthall, 2010) and preliminary analyses of the current set of friendship pairs suggest that women who perceive their friend as more attractive than themselves report more envy toward their friends. Future research could focus on the distinct benefits and costs of having a close female friend who is either more or less attractive than oneself.

A key finding in the current study is that women friends are similar in body shape and bust size. This finding is important because body shape and bust size are tied to attractiveness, and, as shown by others (Peters, Rhodes, & Simmons, 2007) and also in the current study, body shape in women is mapped to physical attractiveness. We propose that if we had photographed women in a tighter frame or bikini suit rather than loose-fitting scrubs, their bodies would have been rated as similarly attractive. We aim to address that limitation in future studies.

Select References

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