# The science of ATTRACTION

**Kaavya Shah** gives you a closer look at five sets of physical traits that, according to research, get heart rates going across the globe

W ho doesn't love the idea of 'love at first sight'? After all, it's rom-com culture's very first tenet. And while many would argue that this immediate attraction is nothing more than misunderstood lust, what is it that makes a person so instantly appealing to us?

For years, psychologists have theorised about the same. Multiple experiments later, it turns out that there has been a surprising amount of agreement upon what we all regard as traditionally beautiful. Prachi Desai Shah, from Unlimited Potentialities, a leading counselling setup in Mumbai

Brangelina the perfect power couple, here's your answer.

## SYMMETRICALLY YOURS

Ever derived immense satisfaction from watching a fruit get cut into two exact halves? That's because humans love symmetry! Even when it comes to ourselves. Multiple inquiries into the topic has led psychologists to believe that people find symmetrical faces more appealing than asymmetrical ones. However, opinions vary on the reason behind this predilection. Some believe that symmetrical features are a mark of better health and thus of better reproductive mates since mutated genes can often manifest as asymmetry. Others back the idea that symmetrical faces feel more familiar and less threatening to us. Similarly, symmetrical bodies are much more appreciated than those that aren't, essentially confirming the notion that balance is always key.

observes, "In my years of practicing psychology, I have definitely noticed specific patterns in the way individuals view physical beauty."

## PRETTY YOUNG THINGS (PYTS)

When renowned social psychologist Leslie Zebrowitz, and her colleagues asked men and women what facial features they found attractive, the answers largely pointed towards youthful characteristics. This includes big round, widely spaced eyes and a small nose and chin. It comes as no surprise then, that women like Mila Kunis and men like Leonardo Dicaprio have ranked high up on 'attractiveness lists' time and again. "People with a cute face might attract immediate attention from the opposite gender. Physical attractiveness, like a cigarette or a drug, gives a sense of instant gratification", says Desai Shah. So, what inclines us towards these 'cute' 'boyish' looks? Zebrowitz claims that baby-faced individuals are more well-liked. Since they so heavily remind us of, well, babies, we tend to assign a child-like innocence to their personality. They are judged to be warmer and more honest, even facing more positive outcomes than the rest of us. Makes perfect sense now, why fairytale villains are always in search of eternal youth!

## CHISELLED TO PERFECTION

While baby-facedness has found patrons across cultures, many find themselves attracted to the other end of the spectrum, too. A 1986 study concluded that men found women with mature features, like prominent cheekbones, high eyebrows, large pupils and a big smile, desirable. The same holds true for women, though not as much as it does for men. Studies show, women preferred men with stereotypically masculine faces featuring low broad jaws, pronounced cheekbones and large chins. Individuals with these mature features were seen as more competent in comparison to those who had more youthful faces. So, for the ones who wondered what made

## AVERAGE JOE

Where we are regularly on the hunt for 'rarity' and 'uniqueness', our instincts are not. On the contrary, we are hardwired to

seek out the average. Research surrounding desirability levels with respect to individual faces versus a composite of those same faces saw participants consistently choose the latter i.e. the average. In fact, researchers pointed out that the more they averaged these faces, the more people found them attractive. One possible explanation for this, much like for facial symmetry, is that we find familiarity in the average. Another states that averageness is representative of good genes. So much for standing out of the crowd!

## THE GOLDEN RATIO

When Shakira philosophised that "hips don't lie", she wasn't entirely lying. The evolutionary perspective on beauty perception states that men seem to look for fertility cues in women. And one such major cue is the waist-to-hip ratio. A low waist-to-hip ratio (i.e. large hips and a small waist) produces an 'hourglass figure' and is allegedly indicative of a higher level of fertility in women. Desai Shah sees this ring true closer to home as well, stating "I think in India, specifically, that is the case. For instance, a thin girl is thought to be less fertile and there are doubts on whether she will be able to bear a healthy child." When it comes to men, women claim prefer a masculine waist-to-hip ratio, al-

though height and broad shoulders place higher on the list of criteria as they are suggestive of better hunting capabilities amongst men. The influence of evolutionary instincts upon our judgements, however, has constantly been questioned. Desai Shah adds, "Some of these beliefs might lie in some scientific truth, but largely we've been taught to view beauty in a similar lens and this can be quite demotivating for people. It's a judgmental attitude we've adopted."

In addition to these traits, a number of other physical, non-physical and cultural elements mesh together to determine how attracted we are to a person. But in a world that's critiquing and relearning old behaviours every day, the way we perceive beauty is changing at the drop of a

hashtag. Desai Shah insightfully concludes, "People are opening their eyes towards a different take on beauty. The feminist perspective has fought against 'fair & lovely'. The recent Black Lives Matter movement has also brought to light the age-old discrimination based on skin colour. There are clothing stores for 'plus size' women world over including India." Basically, what glittered yesterday, may not be gold tomorrow!