

# “Pretty boys do not cry” – the role of facial expressions in facial attractiveness rating

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Facial attractiveness is the concept that has been widely explored in previous studies. The findings suggest that some of the factors that affect aesthetical judgment of faces include symmetry, averageness, and facial expressions. The role of facial expressions is not fully established, but it seems that faces with the facial expression of happiness are rated higher (at least female faces). The aim of our study is to explore whether the presence of facial expressions has a different effect on the aesthetic judgment of female and male faces. Unlike previous studies, in which this was not explicitly controlled, we only considered facial expressions that were correctly recognized at 90% or more. A total of 61 respondents participated in this study. They evaluated female and male faces with the expressions of happiness, anger, sadness, or neutral on several scales: Beautiful, Pleasant, Attractive, and Harmonious. Overall, female faces were rated as more attractive, beautiful, and pleasant, but not harmonious. In addition, faces with the expressions of anger and sadness were rated lower on each scale compared to neutral and happy faces, and sad male faces were rated lower compared to sad female faces. One of the possible explanations for such a result could be the role of the social context in which the society discourages the display of certain emotions, particularly for men. Sad men are seen as weak and weak men are not attractive (because this does not fit into their gender role).

**Keywords:** facial expressions, beauty, facial attractiveness, aesthetic

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## Introduction

Faces are not just one of the key sources of information about someone's identity, emotions, and intentions, but also about attractiveness. Numerous studies have shown that person's attractiveness could be the factor that determines outcomes in different social interactions. It has been shown that people who are perceived as attractive are also viewed as more competent (Hamermesh & Parker, 2005) and socially desirable (Langlois et al., 2000). This could likely explain why they have a greater chance to be hired (e.g. Watkins & Johnston, 2000). Finally, it is clear that facial attractiveness also plays an important role in sexual attraction and partner selection.

## What makes a face appealing?

Previous studies that investigated facial attractiveness identified several factors associated with perceived attractiveness. These include *sexual dimorphism* (Perrett et al., 1998; Rhodes et al., 2000), *symmetry* (Perrett et al., 1999; Rhodes et al., 1998; Scheib et al., 1999) and *averageness* (Langlois & Roggman, 1990; Thornhill & Gangestad, 1993). All of these factors could be considered unchangeable. However, in real-life situations, we also rely on facial expressions. It has been shown that particular facial expressions could affect facial attractiveness. For example, one of the standard findings is that smiling increases attractiveness (Reis et al., 1990), while the presence of sadness, anger, or disgust decreases attractiveness (Mueser et al., 1984, Ueda et al., 2016). Similar results were also obtained in another study (Ebner et al., 2018), which showed that faces with happy expressions were rated as more attractive than faces with neutral expressions, while faces with negative expressions were rated as less attractive compared to neutral expressions. This was particularly the case for expressions of disgust.

However, when the gender factor is also taken into account, the results are not always consistent. In one study (Garrido & Prada, 2017), it was reported that faces with the expressions of happiness were evaluated as the most attractive, followed by neutral and angry expressions. Furthermore, in this study, all female faces were rated as more attractive than male faces, regardless of the expression presented. Some other studies suggest that the same facial expression could affect the aesthetic judgment of female and male faces differently. For example, Tracy and Beall (2016) showed that expressions of happiness were rated differently on male and female faces. While a happy expression was the most attractive expression for female faces, it was among the least attractive expressions for male faces. The opposite trend was observed for the expression of pride.

The differences may be explained by different methodologies and particular datasets used in research. Many studies used a smaller set of stimuli with a limited number of facial expressions (which could have

affected generalizability). An additional problem could be the fact that all of the used datasets contained posed expressions and often it was not directly assessed whether participants could identify particular expressions correctly (i.e., whether there was a match between what certain expressions were supposed to represent and how observers actually saw that facial gestalt). We believe that this may be one of the biggest issues in this type of research. For example, in one study (Tracy & Beall, 2016), the expression of pride was not only portrayed by facial expressions but also by the body position (i.e., raised arms), which could have biased the results. Therefore, our first step in the current study was to select only those expressions that accurately depicted particular emotions (based on the ratings available in the supplementary material of the database). Furthermore, we decided to include only basic emotions, i.e. those that have been shown to be cross-culturally universal (Ekman, 1992; Izard, 1971; Tracy & Matsumoto, 2008).

In this study, we investigate the effects of four facial expressions (happiness, sadness, anger, and neutral) on the aesthetic rating of female and male faces. We decided to include two facial expressions with negative valence, anger and sadness, separately rather than grouping them into categories of "negative" emotions. One of the main reasons for this decision was the assumption that these two emotions might have different social meanings and, therefore, observers' behaviour might differ. For example, it is expected that anger could provoke avoidance behaviour, whereas sadness could result in someone approaching and offering help.

In line with previous studies, we formulate the following hypotheses:

H1: Faces presented with a happy facial expression (regardless of gender) will be rated higher compared to the faces presented with other facial expressions across all four scales.

Furthermore, since a specific culture defines which behaviour and emotions are acceptable, we hypothesize that a deviation from these norms will result in a lower rating. More specifically:

H2: The presence of an angry facial expression will result in lower ratings, especially for female faces. Previous studies (e.g. Lewis, 2000) showed that gender-role expectations could influence the perception of effectiveness in leaders. This study showed that female leaders with the expression of anger and sadness were rated as less effective leaders. Angry male leaders were not perceived as less effective. Lewis argued that anger expressed by male leaders was associated with confidence, assertiveness, and integrity, while the same emotion expressed by female leaders was seen as a sign of instability and aggression. Similarly, some other studies (e.g. Hess et al., 2005) showed that dominance was also associated with the expression of anger, and, at the same time, male faces were rated as more dominant. This study also confirmed that the expression of anger was more expected

for males. Since we explore the aesthetic aspects, in line with the previous study, we expect that anger influences more negative ratings of female faces.

H3: The presence of a sad expression will negatively impact the ratings of male faces. In our culture, men are not encouraged to show emotions, sadness in particular. A previously mentioned study (Lewis, 2000) showed that the presence of a sad expression in male leaders also led to a lower rating of their effectiveness. This is not surprising knowing that sadness could be seen as passiveness and lack of confidence. Therefore, we expect sad expressions to lower the ratings for male faces in particular.

Finally, we want to test whether the use of different scales, which is standard practice in other aesthetic judgment studies (e.g., Marković, 2014), is also useful in the context of facial beauty. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H5: The presence of facial expressions affects the rating of female and male faces differently regarding different aspects of aesthetics judgment measured by four different scales.

## Method

**Participants:** A total of 61 students (20 males and 41 females, average age 22.22 (SD=5.58) from the Faculty of Sport and Psychology Tims and College for Vocational Education of Preschool Teachers and Sports Trainers participated in this study. The sample was convenient. A post-hoc power analysis revealed that the power of our sample was 1.00 for small effect size detection (Cohen's  $d = 0.2$ , at  $\alpha = 0.05$  level of probability, as proposed by Cohen, 1988).

**Stimuli:** We used a total of 80 photographs of 20 people (10 male and 10 female) with four different facial expressions: anger, sadness, happiness, and a neutral facial expression. Each person (stimulus) was presented with four previously selected expressions in a randomized order. In this way, we attempted to control the effects of both identity (i.e., the morphology of a particular face) and emotions.

All stimuli were selected from the FACES database (Ebner et al., 2010), based on recognition accuracy for each facial expression, and these data are part of the FACES database. Recognition accuracy of over 90% was used for each photograph in the experiment. In addition, an equal number of male and female faces was selected. As a result, 80 photographs (10 male and 10 female, each with four different facial expressions) were selected for the experiment. The mean accuracy of the selected stimuli (based on database' supplementary data that were previously collected) was 0.97(SD = 0.03).

**Procedure:** The study was approved by the Ethical Board of the Faculty of Sport and Psychology, Tims from Novi Sad. The experiment was originally

built in the OpenSesame software (Mathôt, Schreij, & Theeuwes, 2012), and later it was adapted for online presentation and conducted online on the JATOS platform (Lange, Kühn, & Filevich, 2015) due to the coronavirus pandemic. Each participant was instructed to conduct the experiment at a time when they could fully focus, and exclusively on a PC or laptop computer.

Prior to the main experiment, participants received detailed instructions, followed by a short practice in order to familiarize themselves with the experimental procedure.

As mentioned earlier, in the experimental part, 10 male and 10 female faces were presented with four different expressions (happiness, sadness, anger, and neutral), resulting in 80 trials that were presented randomly in four experimental blocks of equal size. After each experimental block, participants were offered a short break before continuing with the next block.

At the beginning of each trial, a fixation point was displayed at the top of the screen for 500 ms, followed by a particular stimulus. While the stimulus remained on the screen, four evaluation scales were presented sequentially in the lower part of the screen, one below another. The participant's task was to rate the presented face on a 7-point scale, while ignoring the facial expression of that face.

Four scales were used for evaluation: Beautiful, Harmonious, Pleasant, and Attractive, with the idea to measure different aspects of facial attractiveness. After the first evaluation, the first scale was removed and another scale was presented slightly below the first one until the second evaluation. This procedure was repeated until the participant had responded on each of the four scales.

The average time needed to finish the experiment was about 30 minutes.

### **Data analytic plan**

JASP version 0.16.3 (JASP team, 2022) was used for the analysis. Each scale (Beautiful, Pleasant, Attractive, and Harmonious) was analysed separately. Repeated measures were used (ANOVA) and two factors were included: gender of the presented face (male or female) and expressions (happiness, neutral, sadness, or anger).

### **Results**

The obtained results showed a similar trend between different scales (for full details, see Table 1 and Table 2). First of all, there were gender differences regarding aesthetic ratings on all scales, except the Harmonious scale. When participants were given the task to evaluate how harmonious each face was, no gender differences were detected. On the other hand, female faces were systematically rated as more beautiful, attractive, and pleasant when the

simple main effect of gender was analysed. Our results also showed that faces were rated differently depending on the particular expression that they were presented with. Angry and sad faces were rated lower compared to the faces with neutral and happy expressions (Graph 1), regardless of the scale used.

Finally, interactions between gender and expression were also found. The Bonferroni post hoc test showed that sad male faces were rated lower compared to female faces with the same expression on all scales. Furthermore, angry male faces were also rated lower compared to angry female faces but only on one scale – Beautiful. Interestingly, there were no statistical differences between happy male and happy female faces, as well as between neutral male and neutral female faces.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive statistics for all variables used in the analysis*

scale	gender	expressions							
		happy		neutral		sad		angry	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Beautiful	male faces	4.38	1.32	4.18	1.09	3.32	1.32	3.26	1.28
	female faces	4.34	1.26	4.32	1.18	3.82	1.38	3.49	1.47
Pleasant	male faces	4.63	1.35	4.08	1.00	2.97	1.20	2.86	1.22
	female faces	4.59	1.26	4.14	1.08	3.39	1.27	3.04	1.36
Attractive	male faces	4.07	1.51	3.72	1.28	2.68	1.29	2.66	1.35
	female faces	4.14	1.32	3.87	1.17	3.16	1.26	2.83	1.39
Harmonious	male faces	4.37	1.22	4.23	1.06	3.19	1.23	3.14	1.26
	female faces	4.30	1.17	4.12	1.07	3.48	1.16	3.28	1.37

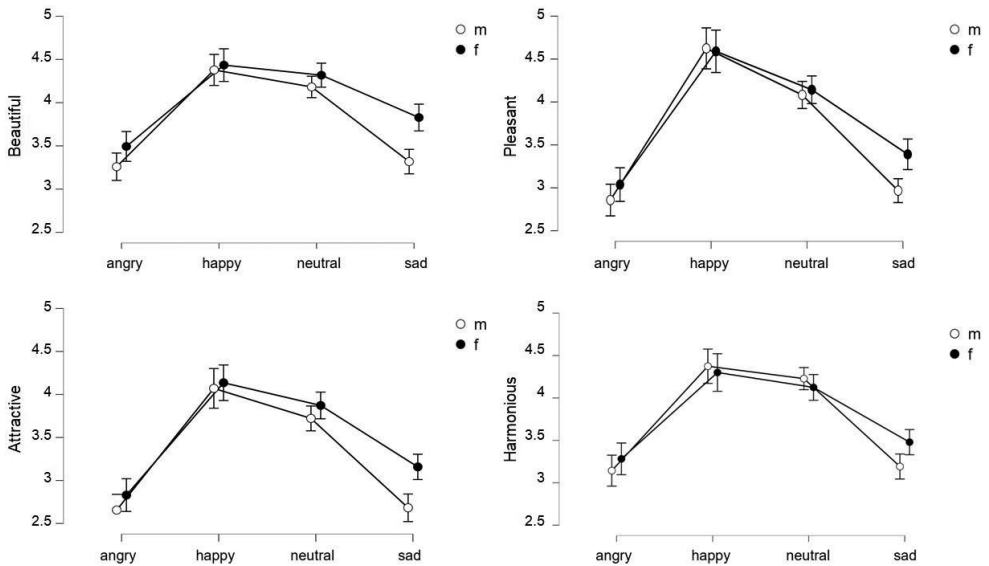
**Table 2**

*The results of Repeated measures Analysis of Variance*

Scale	Factor	df	F	p	$\eta^2$
Beautiful	Gender	(1, 80)	16.71	<.001	0.03
	emotions	(3,180) <sup>a</sup>	47.55	<.001	0.35
	Gender *emotions	(3, 180)	10.70	<.001	0.01
Pleasant	Gender	(1, 80)	10.24	0.002	0.01
	emotions	(3,180) <sup>a</sup>	67.86	<.001	0.48
	Gender *emotions	(3, 180)	11.34	<.001	0.01
Attractive	Gender	(1, 80)	12.53	<.001	0.02
	emotions	(3,180) <sup>a</sup>	59.35	<.001	0.43
	Gender *emotions	(3, 180)	10.41	<.001	0.01
Harmonious	Gender	(1, 80)	1.18	0.282	0.00
	emotions	(3,180) <sup>a</sup>	47.77	<.001	0.38
	Gender *emotions	(3, 180)	10.26	<.001	0.01

*Note.*

<sup>a</sup> Mauchly's test of sphericity indicated that the assumption of sphericity was violated ( $p < .05$ ) so the Greenhouse-Geisser correction was applied.



**Graph 1**

*Aesthetic judgment of faces with expressions of anger, happiness, neutral, and sadness on four different scales.*

## Discussion

This study provided additional support for the thesis that the presence of particular facial expressions affects aesthetic judgment. In line with previous studies (Garrido & Prada, 2017; Reis et al., 1990), smiling was shown to increase aesthetic judgment for both male and female faces, while the faces with the so-called negative expressions were rated lower (Mueser et al., 1984, Ueda et al., 2016). The most interesting result is the fact that sadness decreased the rating of male faces to greater extent. Such a result implies that sociocultural factors may also play a role in judging the aesthetics of some faces. Some previous studies (e.g. Reis et al., 1990) have shown that smiling not only increases perceived attractiveness but that these faces are judged as more sincere, competent, and sociable. On the other hand, smiling has been associated with lower ratings of independence and masculinity. Therefore, it is possible that sad faces (especially male faces) were rated lower in this study because sadness not only affects attractiveness but is also associated with some other negative traits, such as weakness. Serbian culture is still relatively traditional, and men are not encouraged to express emotions, especially sadness. On the other hand, women are considered more emotional, and, therefore, their expressions of all emotions are more acceptable. Previous

studies (e.g. Van Hemert et al., 2011) examining gender differences regarding crying showed that women in 34 countries reported a greater tendency to cry and shorter periods of time since the last time they had cried. The authors of this study believe that this is at least partially related to the ideas about “proper” behaviour for men and women.

Furthermore, as we expected, the faces with angry expressions were rated lower compared to neutral and happy faces. However, our hypothesis that the presence of anger will affect rating of female faces more was not confirmed. The only difference (found on the scale Beautiful) shows lower ratings for angry male faces compared to females. As we already mentioned, sadness and anger may provoke different reactions – offering help or avoidance of potential danger. Therefore, when rating angry faces, we might unintentionally judge the severity of potential danger instead of fitting with social expectations. Future studies should explore this further.

Contrary to our expectation, this study did not confirm that the use of different scales measured different aspects of facial attractiveness (at least not in the Serbian language). In fact, similar trends were obtained regardless of the particular scale. However, our results suggest that the Beautiful scale may be more sensitive. Further studies should explore whether it is necessary to use different measures or it is sufficient to use only one scale.

Finally, this study also shows that the effects of facial expressions on the aesthetic judgment of faces might be subtle and directly related to a chosen set of stimuli. Therefore, it is very important to select facial expressions not only based on their label in the face database (i.e. what they are supposed to present), but rather based on how observers classify them.

Unlike Garrido and Prada (2017), who showed that female faces with all expressions were rated higher compared to male faces, our study demonstrated that this was the case only for sad expressions on each used scale, and for anger, but only on the scale Beautiful. Gender did not play an important role when faces with neutral and happy expressions were evaluated.

Inconsistency in the results may be explained by different methodologies. Garrido and Prada (2017) did not preselect their stimuli based on recognition accuracy for each expression. Their post hoc analysis of the emotion labelling task showed that there were differences regarding the correct categorization of facial expressions. In general, the correct identification of facial expressions in their set was lower than in ours (0.74 (SD = 0.14) vs 0.97 (SD = 0.03) which, in our opinion, could have affected the obtained results.

Furthermore, Garrido and Prada (2017) reported that happy faces ( $M = 0.89$ ,  $SD = 0.14$ ) were labelled accurately significantly more often than angry ( $M = 0.69$ ,  $SD = 0.19$ ) and neutral faces ( $M = 0.64$ ,  $SD = 0.29$ ). Furthermore, their results also showed that correct categorization of expressions was higher for happy female faces compared to male faces, while angry male faces were correctly labelled more easily than angry female faces.



Bearing in mind that the majority of face databases consist of posed expressions, it is reasonable to assume that all facial expressions are not equally successfully portrayed. Hence, if we do not control facial labelling accuracy prior to experiments, it is difficult to determine the real effects of facial expression on aesthetic judgments.

### Limitation

This study included only university students, i.e., younger people. It would be interesting to see if older adults and children evaluate faces in a similar manner. In addition, future studies should include other facial expressions (such as contempt, disgust, surprise, fear, etc.).

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## **“Muškarci ne plaču”: Uloga facijalne ekspresije u proceni atraktivnosti lica**

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Privlačnost ljudskog lica predstavlja koncept koji je intenzivno izučavan u naučnim studijama. Nalazi tih studija pokazuju da na estetsku procenu lica utiču simetrija, prosečnost i facijalna ekspresija. Iako uloga facijalne ekspresije u estetskoj proceni nije sasvim objašnjena, čini se da se lica sa ekspresijom sreće procenjuju kao atraktivnija (bar ženska lica). Cilj naše studije bio je da istražimo da li prisustvo različitih facijalnih ekspresija na licima utiče na estetsku procenu muških i ženskih lica. Za razliku od ranijih studija gde to nije strogo kontrolisano, u našu studiju su uključene samo one ekspresije koje su tačno prepoznate u 90% ili više slučajeva. U istraživanju je učestvovao 61 ispitanik. Zadatak ispitanika bio je da procene muška i ženska lica sa ekspresijama sreće, ljutnje, tuge ili lica sa neutralnim izrazom. Procena je vršena na nekoliko skala: lepo, prijatno, privlačno i skladno. Uopšte uzev, ženska lica su procenjena kao atraktivnija, lepša i prijatnija, ali ne i skladnija. Dalje, lica sa ekspresijama ljutnje i tuge su niže ocenjena na svim skalama u poređenju sa ekspresijom sreće i neutralnim izrazom lica, a muška lica sa ekspresijom tuge su bila niže ocenjena od tužnih ženskih lica. Jedno od mogućih objašnjenja takvih rezultata mogao bi biti socijalni kontekst koji obeshrabruje izražavanje emocija, naročito kod muškaraca. Tužni muškarci se ocenjuju kao slabi, a slabi muškarci mogu biti neatraktivni jer se ne uklapaju u svoju rodnu ulogu.

**Ključne reči:** estetska procena lica, facijalna ekspresija