

*Culture influences the attractiveness of bodies*

Men’s and women’s bodies are more distinct than are men’s and women’s faces. Like facial attractiveness, bodily attractiveness is often a matter of being near one or the other extreme of the masculine–feminine continuum. Thus, body parts that differ relatively little between the sexes, such as the hands and feet, also contribute relatively little to judgments of attractiveness. In general, then, it is likely that the attractiveness of a body signals information about its sexual differentiation under the influence of sex hormones, and hence about its fertility, strength, health, and other traits important for reproduction. Nevertheless, criteria for bodily beauty are not nearly as universal as one might imagine.

Slimness–fatness is an important dimension influencing judgments of attractiveness, especially when women’s attractiveness is being judged (by women or by men). This dimension is usually expressed as the body mass index (BMI).\* The “healthy” BMI range has been defined as 18.5 to 25, but the median BMI in the contemporary United States is near the top of this range (about 24.5 for women in their 20s), so by this standard nearly half of U.S. women in this age range are overweight (BMI of 25 to 30) or obese (BMI > 30).

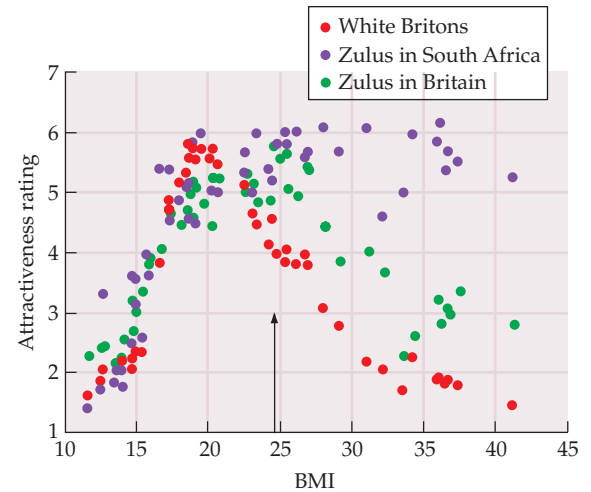
In a number of studies, male and female raters have been asked to judge the attractiveness of women varying in BMI. (They are shown photos of bodies only, without the faces.) Subjects in the United States and other Western countries prefer women with BMIs around 18 to 22, i.e., well below average and near the low end of the normal range. On the basis of these findings, one might be tempted to conclude that slimness is universally preferred, but this is not the case. For one thing, during certain periods in Western history, such as the 17th century, fatness was considered much more attractive than it is now.

Cross-cultural studies have also demonstrated quite diverse preferences. One revealing study was done by a British–South African group of researchers (Tovee et al., 2006). They confirmed that white Britons prefer women with BMIs around 20 and that attractiveness falls off steadily both below and above that value (Figure 5.5). But when judging the same images, rural Zulus in South Africa gave high ratings to women with BMIs of 20 and above, with no suggestion of a fall-off in attractiveness up to a BMI of at least 40. Only on the lower side of 20 was there a rapid reduction in attractiveness.

The researchers added a third group of subjects, namely South African Zulus who had migrated to the United Kingdom within the previous 18 months. As shown in the figure, these subjects quickly changed their preferences, exhibiting much the same dislike of fuller-bodied women as is typical of native Britons. In other words, this study suggested that BMI preferences, at least over the upper part of the range, are influenced by culture. We discuss the cultural forces influencing this variability in Box 5.1.

It may be that the low attractiveness ratings for very underweight women are universal, however. This would make sense in evolutionary terms, because severely underweight women are unlikely to be fertile.

\*Your BMI is your weight in kilograms divided by the square of your height in meters. (If you use pounds and inches, multiply the result by 703.) BMI calculators can be found on the Internet.



**Figure 5.5 Body mass index and beauty** This figure plots the BMI and beauty of 50 women (each dot within a category represents one woman) as rated by three mixed-sex groups of raters: white Britons (red), Zulus in South Africa (purple), and Zulus within 18 months of migrating to Britain (green). After migrating to Britain, the Zulus’ preferences shifted toward the typical Western pattern: Their attraction to large-bodied women decreased. The vertical arrow shows the median BMI for U.S. women in their 20s. (After Tovee et al., 2006.)



Ample-bodied women were admired in 17th-century Europe, as illustrated in this painting, *The Judgment of Paris* by Peter Paul Rubens.