



# Attractiveness Helps Women Secure Mates, But Also Status and Reproductively Relevant Resources

Khandis R. Blake<sup>1</sup>

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In their Target Article, Davis and Arnocky (2020) explain that attractiveness enhancement helps women attract high-quality mates and out-compete potential same-sex romantic competitors, two outcomes central to the arenas in which sexual selection operates. Attractiveness enhancement undoubtedly supports these goals, yet it also provides opportunities for status attainment and competition in domains that are unrelated to mate attraction. For example, by enhancing their attractiveness, women are able to improve their financial standing, encourage prosocial benefits from others, and negotiate higher rank in mixed-sex and female–female hierarchies. These opportunities are reproductively relevant and thus have evolutionary implications. A broader understanding of these non-mating benefits would further the comprehensive contribution offered by Davis and Arnocky and help strengthen the evolutionary psychology of physical appearance enhancement.

## Attractiveness Enhancement Enhances Women’s Status

For both men and women, physical attractiveness offers tangible benefits. This beauty premium sees that attractive people receive more hiring offers, job interviews, and promotions (Maestriperi, Henry, & Nickels, 2017). Compared to their less attractive counterparts, attractive individuals receive higher wages, approximating 10–15% higher earnings (Hamermesh, 2011). Attractiveness enhancement also encourages prosociality from others, forming the kinds of positive impressions that help relationship formation. For

example, attractive people are viewed more positively across a range of phenomena, including trustworthiness, intellectual competence, health, and leadership potential (Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991; Feingold, 1992). Their faces are easier to remember and grab visual attention, even generating higher responsiveness in the reward circuitry of people’s brains (Kranz & Ishai, 2006). Effects are often, but not always, stronger for women; likewise, some effects are specific to mixed-sex interactions, while others are entirely sex independent (Maestriperi et al., 2017).

It is not hard to see how these benefits could translate into improved outcomes for status competition. People who are liked, seen as competent, healthy, and having good leadership potential are more likely to hold high status positions in society (Anderson, Hildreth, & Howland, 2015). High status individuals make desirable allies, they have better access to resources and social networks, and they are better able to advocate for their own interests. Status also influences well-being, self-esteem, and physical health (Anderson, Kraus, Galinsky, & Keltner, 2012; Fournier, 2009; Leary, Cottrell, & Phillips, 2001). Simply moving in the right social circles can afford an individual unparalleled opportunity for gaining and holding status relative to others (Betancourt, Kovács, & Otner, 2018). The resultant benefits of high status—financial standing, social support, alliance formation—all provide resources essential to reproduction. By delivering these benefits, attractiveness enhancement provides a fruitful strategy for women to maximize their social position and thus their opportunity for reproductive success.

One criticism to the idea that attractiveness enhancement enhances female status is that attractive women often bear the brunt of prejudicial, nasty behavior from other women. Why would they use attractiveness enhancement to gain status, if it risked retaliation and threatened female–female relationships? Although attractive women are often the targets of gossip and intrasexual aggression from other women (Reynolds, 2021), it is important to acknowledge the difference between physical attractiveness and sexual attractiveness. The latter insinuates an

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✉ Khandis R. Blake  
khandis.blake@unimelb.edu.au

<sup>1</sup> Melbourne School of Psychological Sciences, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, VIC 3010, Australia

intention to seek and attract potential mates, which is indeed threatening in the intrasexual arena. Yet, this insinuation is not a necessary facet of physical attractiveness per se. One of the reasons that some women may be so preoccupied with slight differences in appearance is because of these critical connotations that their appearance conveys regarding their intentions to seek and poach mates. Said more simply, there is a fine line between looking attractive and looking like you want others to be sexually attracted to you. This line requires careful negotiation in female–female relationships.

### Is Status Relevant for Female Reproductive Success?

Unlike men, status does not seem to be a core component of women's mate value (Buss, 2016). Just because women's status is not strongly relevant for intersexual selection, however, does not mean it is irrelevant for intrasexual competition and reproductive success more generally. Across a range of cultures and species, high status has been shown to increase female as well as male survival and reproductive success. One of the key ways it does so is by increasing social dominance, which has been shown to promote higher reproductive success and survival in at least 15 mammal species (Stockley & Bro-Jørgensen, 2011). Social dominance, in turn, appears to increase reproductive success by provisioning dominant females with high-quality, prolific resources. These resources may take the form of food, environments, allomothers, alliances, protectors, and advocates.

Attaining reproductively relevant resources promotes the survival and reproductive success of the self and one's descendants and allows one to inhibit the reproduction of competitors. These benefits have been overlooked in the consideration of women's intrasexual competition and have important implications for understanding why women enact the mate attraction strategies that they do (and what these strategies ultimately function to achieve). Attaining enough resources to sustain not only one's own reproduction, but also the reproduction of one's lineage, can help a woman achieve her own interests and build capital for herself and her offspring. As Hrdy (2000, p. 52) stated, "a female's quest for status—her ambition, if you will—has become inseparable from her ability to keep her offspring and grand-offspring alive. Far from conflicting with maternity, such a female's 'ambitious' tendencies are part and parcel of maternal success."

Attaining these reproductively relevant resources is a driving force for women's mate competition and, I would argue, for their appearance-enhancing behavior. Access to mates themselves is not commonly a limiting resource for females. To the extent that limiting resources drive competition, access to the resources needed to reproduce—rather than mates per se—is likely a more potent force for intrasexual competition among females. In support of this view, where mate competition does

occur among females, it occurs more readily in environments where the resources held by mates is paramount to female survival and fitness (Stockley & Bro-Jørgensen, 2011). The distinction is subtle but important. It is this additional motivational layer to appearance enhancement that would benefit from further emphasis and exploration.

### The Importance of the Socioecological Context

For much of our history, and in many countries still to this day, women's ability to secure a high-quality mate is a key pathway—sometimes the only pathway—to survival and flourishing. It is thus unsurprising that the resources held by men are a key component of women's decision-making criteria when choosing a mate. If we consider that it is often the resources that are the limiting factor in the transaction and not the mate, it becomes clearer why socioecological conditions such as gender inequality are highly relevant to sexual selection. By altering the bargaining power between the sexes and restraining women economic and social independence, gender inequality should exacerbate women's competition for mates. In these environments, securing mates is one of the only strategies that women have to survive and reproduce.

Although much of the world has made stable progress toward gender equity, many women still feel that their physical attractiveness is the most valuable resource they have. If, as society progresses toward gender equity, women's ability to independently hold reproductively relevant resources reduces the incentive for attractiveness enhancement, then that will tell us the extent to which mating competition affects attractiveness enhancement. Experimental designs that manipulate resource holding by sex or threaten status, then measure attractiveness enhancement, would go a long way toward uncovering the conditions that incentivize attractiveness enhancement and their relation to reproduction.

When we look to the future and consider the importance of attractiveness enhancement for women, my prediction is that as resource holdings become more disparate and unequal, we will see more attractiveness enhancement. In such environments, status seeking becomes more salient, and attractiveness enhancement helps fulfil this goal. Whether this attractiveness enhancement is functioning primarily to attract mates, or to secure other non-mating related benefits, is uncertain. In my own work so far, we have found that general mechanisms for status seeking, and not mating competition, drive attractiveness enhancement strategies among women in resource unequal contexts (Blake & Brooks, 2019). This finding mirrors the link found in the eating disorder literature, where low social rank is a precursor to eating pathology (de Paoli, Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, Halliwell, Puccio, & Krug, 2017). The incentive to enhance one's appearance may shift alongside socioecological contexts

where women can secure reproductively relevant resources without securing a mate. More work in this area would be a worthy pursuit.

## Conclusion

Davis and Arnocky (2020) provide a timely and extensive literature review on the evolutionary origins of appearance-enhancing behavior, much of which notes the benefits of attractiveness enhancement in attracting and competing for potential mates. Yet, we should remember that the intrinsic value of beauty as a mate attraction characteristic bleeds into other domains, especially in enhancing status. Davis and Arnocky are quite right that mate attraction via attractiveness enhancement is an undeniable element of much female–female competition. It is important to emphasize, though, that the ultimate function of mate attraction may be less about securing the mate and more about securing the resources they hold.

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## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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