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Ecological Modulation of Facial Preferences and Social Information Use in Human Mate Choice

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Abstract

Human mate choice is shaped by both individual preferences and social and ecological context. Across three experiments, we test how cues of resource scarcity versus abundance shift (1) preferences for sexually dimorphic facial traits and (2) mate-choice copying (MCC), and whether any effects persist. In Experiment 1, women completed a rapid preference task before and after watching videos depicting harsh (resource-poor) or abundant (resource-rich) environments. Exposure to abundance increased preferences for masculine male faces relative to harsh cues. Experiment 2 asked whether the same environmental cues change MCC, whether this differs for sexually dimorphic versus more neutral faces, and how long any changes last across immediate and delayed tests. MCC was reliable overall, but its longer-lasting effects were observed only in the abundant condition, consistent with reduced reliance on social information under harshness. Experiment 3 repeats Experiment 1 in men using female stimuli to test generality across sexes.