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Value Orientations as Predictors of the Importance of Physical Attractiveness in Friendships and Romantic Relationships

Vera A. Labunskaya^{1✉}, **Oksana R. Gura**²

^{1,2} Southern Federal University, Rostov-on-Don, Russian Federation

✉ vlab@aanet.ru

Abstract: Introduction. The analysis of factors increasing/decreasing the importance of physical attractiveness (PA) has reinforced the need to study value-oriented predictors. This study aims to determine the hierarchy of intensities of the impact of value orientations (VOs) on the levels of importance of PA in interpersonal relationships – friendships and romantic relationships. This paper represents a first attempt to examine the value-orientation regulation of different levels of importance of PA. The following hypotheses were tested: Hypothesis 1: There are gender and age-related differences in the levels of importance of PA (Mann–Whitney criterion). Hypothesis 2: There is the hierarchy of intensities of the impact of VOs on the level of importance of PA in different types of interpersonal relationships (multiple regression analysis). **Methods.** The study used the following assessment tools: (a) the questionnaire for Diagnosing the Importance of PA in Various Spheres of Life (V. A. Labunskaya, G. V. Serikov); (b) a modified version of the questionnaire by S. S. Bubnova for Diagnosing the Real Structure of Personal VOs. Russian sample comprised 172 individual participants (aged 18–25 years, $M = 20.1$) falling into the following subgroups: a) 18–20 year olds ($n = 113$, 57 % males) and b) 21–25 year olds ($n = 59$, 36 males). **Results.** As men move into the age group of 21–25 year olds, the importance of PA for romantic relationships increases significantly. Women demonstrate a level of importance of PA regardless of the type of interpersonal relationships. The study revealed the following hierarchy of intensities of the impact of VOs on the importance of PA: 1) VOs toward recognition, respect, and exerting influence over others; VO toward PA; 2) VOs toward social activity, high social status, and managing others; 3) VO toward material well-being; and VO toward seeking beauty and enjoying it. **Discussion.** The comparative and hierarchical analysis of the impact of VOs on the importance of PA in interpersonal relationships is without parallel in the psychology of physical appearance. The study provides new insights into the impact of VOs, levels of importance of PA, and types of interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: predictors, impact intensity, hierarchy, physical attractiveness, value orientations, importance level, interpersonal relationships, romantic relationships, friendships, attractive appearance, gender, age

Highlights:

- VOs of communication subjects represent fundamental predictors of the importance of PA in interpersonal relationships.
- The levels of importance of PA do not differ among young Russians depending on their gender.
- For young men, the dynamics of the importance of PA in romantic relationships is age-dependent.
- The hierarchy of the intensities of the impact of VOs is not constant and depends on the type of interpersonal relationships (friendships, romantic relationships) and the level of importance of PA.

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Introduction

There is no need to prove the impact of physical attractiveness (PA) on interpersonal relationships. Numerous studies present multiple functions of PA in communication (Dementii & Varlashkina, 2010; Dosina & Koshkina, 2010; Hergovich, 2014; Swami & Fernham, 2009; Napp & Hall, 2014, etc.), emphasizing a special importance of PA in the regulation of interpersonal relationships. Among youths and in other age groups, it is widely believed that PA improves various types of interpersonal relationships. For example, higher physical attractiveness contributes to a greater number of friends, may help in finding romantic partners, and choose among them (Hergovich, 2014; Swami & Fernham, 2009). Researchers (Avilés et al., 2021) believe that PA is a precondition for romantic relationships and may affect commitment to such relationships. Their study of couples living in Western Europe showed that partners are interested in relationship commitment when they find each other attractive, but decrease their interest if one partner finds himself/herself more attractive. A study (Deng et al., 2019) found that romantic relationship status effects appearance-based rejection of a partner. This feature is most pronounced in singles who have low PA ratings. To determine the extent to which contributions to PA are related to an individual's self-perception as a romantic partner, a study (Mafra et al., 2016) was conducted demonstrating that women's investments are related to their economic status but not to their assessment of themselves as a romantic partner, while men's investments are driven by PA self-assessments. In other words, the importance of PA for emergence of romantic relationships, their continuation, and retention of a romantic partner, in turn, depends on various factors, in particular on partners' gender and their economic status. We should also emphasize the role of socio-cultural contexts, because these studies were carried out by scientists working with respondents living in China, Brazil, and European countries.

Such a diversity of works does not facilitate the formulation of unequivocal conclusions regarding the importance of PA in interpersonal relationships. With various contexts of studying this phenomenon, new evidence emerges, such as the importance of PA in the formation of a circle

of friends in social networks (Walther et al., 2008). The ambiguity of findings on the importance of PA in individuals' social lives raises the question of whether PA really matters for successful communication, friendships, and romantic relationships. Modes and types of interaction (Albada et al., 2002) and a measure of partner concern about each other's appearance (Chevallereau et al., 2021) may increase/decrease the importance of PA. Several studies have demonstrated gender and age-related factors in the importance of PA and body image (Ragozinskaya, 2017; Laus et al., 2018). A summary paper (Quittkat et al., 2019) highlights contradictions in the study of the effects of gender and age on satisfaction with PA and its importance. These authors prove that women emphasize the importance of their appearance more than men. Age is also an important predictor of the importance of PA, but only for men. Thus, with increasing age, the importance of PA decreases among men. The importance of PA remains almost unchanged in women with increasing age.

Heider et al. (2018) consider individuals' negative attitudes toward their PA as the result of a mismatch between actual PA and ideal PA, body image. In this regard, they introduce a predictor – implicit beliefs that thinness corresponds to the standard of beauty. A hierarchical regression analysis showed that implicit beliefs predict self-reported body dissatisfaction. Another study (Lee et al., 2017) examined the importance of PA for high school students. This study showed that girls tended to ascribe higher importance to PA and showed an increased interest in self-care. Compared to male students, girls had lower satisfaction with PA. In general, students who ascribe higher importance to PA are more likely than others to turn to practices to control their bodies. Chae (2022) examined the influence of sexual factors in combination with a number of socio-demographic factors, including school type, the presence or absence of proper nutrition education and sex education, students' academic performance, physical activity in school physical education classes, weight control efforts, and economic status. The influence of these factors was examined in relation to attitudes toward PA, in particular with the example of body image distortion and its correspondence to BMI indicators. Despite the large number of participants in this study, no significant sex differences in body image distortion were found. School performance and weight control were predictors of body image distortion in both males and females. For males, body image might be impacted by participation in physical education classes; for females, economic status effected attitudes toward PA. The results of this study indicate that gender as a predictor of the importance of PA should be examined in combination with other predictors. This approach becomes relevant due to the ideas of objectification and self-objectification theory. Referring to a number of studies, D. V. Kashirskii and O. V. Myasnikova (Kashirsky & Myasnikova, 2020) emphasize the relationship between self-objectification and social anxiety, which is determined by PA. They also note that problems correlating with the phenomenon of objectification and self-objectification are more characteristic of women. The researchers (Gervais et al., 2020) propose a model of goal-based objectifying exchanges between men and women.

In the psychology of PA, women-oriented narratives are represented not only in recent works, but also in earlier studies. Davis et al. (2001) examined personality traits of women demonstrating an orientation toward PA. Women with neurotic and narcissistic traits are more focused on their PA. These personality traits predict the measure of importance of PA. Conducting a systematic analysis of relationships between self-objectification and personality traits, Carrotte & Randerson (2018) concluded that self-objectification is positively related to neuroticism, perfectionism, and narcissism. Along with this statement, E. Carrotte & J. Randerson have noted that

to date it is difficult to make fundamental conclusions about other personality traits of women seeking self-objectification through PA.

The impact of the social environment (Izydorczyk et al., 2021; Jansen et al., 2022; Stojcic et al., 2020) on changes in the importance of PA, body image satisfaction, etc. are considered as predictors. Social predictors include exposure to peers, parents, and the media; the intensity of the impact of these factors is mediated by the mechanisms of internalization and social comparison (Izydorczyk et al., 2021; Morgan et al., 2022). The phenomenon of selfies has been studied as a social predictor (Chae, 2019), which reinforces the value of beauty, increases the importance of PA, and may lead to lookism. In accordance with the idea that a number of predictors affect attitudes toward PA, the impact of selfies was studied along with the impact of self-esteem and PA care behaviors. Acceptance of discrimination was found to be related to emphasizing the privileges of more physically attractive individuals. Women with high self-esteem, who do not resort to various cosmetic practices, do not accept such a type of discrimination.

A brief review of current research in the psychology of PA enabled us to draw a number of conclusions:

1. In the works under consideration, the emphasis is not so much on the study of different types of interpersonal relations, but rather on the study of relationships between men and women or on the determination of gender differences in attitudes toward PA. Certainly, among the types of interpersonal relationships, the study of romantic relationships prevails. Meanwhile, there is a lack of studies on friendships, which can be both between men and women. Therefore, it is necessary to study the influence of gender and age on the importance of PA in different types of interpersonal relationships – friendships and romantic relationships. Taking into account the obvious similarity of some parameters, these types of interpersonal relationships differ in their characteristics. High self-value, emotional attachment, mutual sympathy of partners, boundless loyalty, mutual understanding, and unselfishness are inherent in friendships (Levchenko & Ostanin, 2017, p. 97). Romantic relationships are characterized primarily by the presence of intimacy based on love for a partner and on sexual affection for him/her (Bochaver, 2011).

2. Researchers (Vossbeck-Elsebusch et al., 2014) traditionally define the phenomenon of the Importance of PA by introducing the concept of *Appearance Orientation*, which is interpreted as a cognitive-emotional, behavioral construct that includes individuals' investments in their appearance, measured by time spent and material contributions in order to create an attractive, ideal PA. Behavioral and emotional-cognitive aspects of the importance of PA may not coincide, as in any socio-psychological formations. However, emotional-cognitive phenomena may perform attributive functions – attributing to PA the function of changing various aspects of life, including interpersonal relationships. In this study, we understand the importance of PA as a subjective evaluation of the function of changing interpersonal relationships attributed to PA. The subjective evaluation has metrics that allow us to determine the level of importance of PA.

3. The study of the predictors of the importance of PA should take into account the fact that the study participants are Russians of different gender and age groups. In one of our works (Labunskaya, 2021) we considered trends in the study of attitudes toward appearance and outlined a trend – sociocultural, 'country-specific' approaches to the study of attitudes toward various components of PA.

4. Various predictors and dependent variables should be considered as level formations. The 'value of PA' and 'value orientation toward PA' should be considered as a core of the 'multifactor

model of attitude toward individual PA' (Labunskaya et al., 2019b). As a part of individuals' VO, value orientations toward PA extend the value structure of the subject of communication (Labunskaya et al., 2019a).

5. VOs are considered the main predictor of the importance of PA because VOs regulate an individual's social activity (Shamionov et al., 2022), intergenerational interaction (Pishchik, 2019), attitude toward PA (Serikov, 2018) and, entering into meaning-in-life orientations, manage his/her behavior in a situation of uncertainty (Abakumova et al., 2022).

6. Based on the interpretation of values and VOs as indicators of "valuable and meaningful objects and relations..." (Pishchik, 2019, p. 69), in this study we will consider PA as a 'valuable object', and the orientation toward PA will be included as VO in the structure of VOs. VOs will represent predictors of the importance of PA.

Thus, this study implements the methodology of a comparative-hierarchical study of the intensities of the impact of value orientations on different levels of importance of PA in different types of interpersonal relationships. In this regard, *this study aims* to determine the intensity of the impact of VOs on different levels of importance of PA in friendships and romantic relationships, using a comparative-hierarchical approach.

Methods

Experimental design

At the first stage we examined gender and age-related differences in the levels of importance of PA. At the second stage of the study we determined a hierarchy of the intensities of the impact of VOs on the levels of importance of PA in friendships and romantic relationships.

Assessment tools

1. The questionnaire for Diagnosing the Importance of PA in Various Spheres of Life developed together with G. V. Serikov (Labunskaya & Serikov, 2018; Serikov, 2018). Research participants were asked to answer the question, "How much would your friendships and romantic relationships change if you were more physically attractive?" The respondents were asked to use a five-point scale. Each point was a metric for the subjective evaluation of the 'investment contribution' of PA in developing and improving interpersonal relationships (5 = definitely true, 4 = mostly true, 3 = somewhat true, 2 = somewhat false, 1 = definitely false). Based upon the subjective ratings, we determined the importance of PA for two types of interpersonal relationships – a) friendships and b) romantic relationships.

2. A modified version of the questionnaire by S. S. Bubnova (Bubnova, 1994) for Diagnosing the Real Structure of Personal VOs which included judgments revealing VOs toward PA (full version of the questionnaire is presented in (Labunskaya et al., 2019b)).

Study sample

The study sample comprised 172 Russian young adults, aged 18–25 years ($M = 20.1$). The respondents fell into two age subgroups: 1) those aged 18–20 years ($n = 113$, 57 % males) and 2) those aged 21–25 years ($n = 59$, 36 % males). Distribution of study participants according to a level of importance of PA, revealed on the basis of descriptive statistics and the frequency analysis of subjective evaluations of the 'investment contribution' of PA to the types of interpersonal relationships was as follows: (a) 15.1 % of respondents indicated a low level of importance of

PA for friendships; 24.4 % of respondents indicated a low level of importance of PA for romantic relationships; (b) 23.3 % of respondents indicated a below average level of importance of PA for friendships; 19.8 % of respondents indicated a below average level of importance of PA for romantic relationships; (c) 29 % of respondents indicated an above average level of importance of PA for friendships; 17.4 % of respondents indicated an above average level of importance of PA for romantic relationships. More than a third of the study participants highly appreciate the importance of PA for friendships (32.6 %) and for romantic relationships (38.4 %). Combining low and 'below average' levels, high and 'above average' levels of importance of PA provides the following percentage distribution of the study participants: 38.4 % assign low and 'below average' importance to PA for friendships, 54.2 % – for romantic relationships; 61.7 % assign high and 'above average' importance to PA for friendships, 55.8 % – for romantic relationships.

Mathematical procedures

Taking into account the recommendations of specialists (Nasledov, 2005), in case of non-normal or close to normal distribution of the levels of importance of PA it is necessary to use the nonparametric Mann–Whitney test. We used it to test the *hypothesis* of gender and age-related differences in the levels of importance of PA. We used multiple regression to test the *hypothesis* of the hierarchy of intensities of the impact of VOs on the levels of importance of PA in interpersonal relationships. We used the multiple regression analysis for subgroups of study participants with low and high levels of importance of PA for friendships and romantic relationships. This sequence of multiple regression analysis enabled us to conduct a comparative-hierarchical analysis of the effects of VOs, taking into account the level of importance of PA and the type of interpersonal relationships.

Results

1. The U criterion at $p > 0.05$ (Table 1) indicates that there are no significant differences in the levels of importance of PA between women and men of different age groups. Based upon the mean ranks, we should note that regardless of age subgroup women assign more importance to PA than men.

Table 1

Gender differences in the importance of physical attractiveness for friendships and romantic relationships across age subgroups

Statistics	Importance of physical attractiveness for friendships	Importance of physical attractiveness for romantic relationships
Age subgroup 1 (18–20 years)		
Mann–Whitney U test	1306.000	1384.000
Two-tailed P	0.137	0.299

Statistics	Importance of physical attractiveness for friendships	Importance of physical attractiveness for romantic relationships
Age subgroup 2 (21–25 years)		
Mann–Whitney U test	336.000	285.000
Two-tailed P	0.316	0.067

a. Grouping variable: gender.

2. The levels of importance of PA do not differ among women of different age groups ($U = 746.000$ at $p = 0.147$, friendships; $U = 762.000$ at $p = 0.182$, romantic relationships).

3. In the group of men the level of importance of PA for friendships does not change significantly with age ($U = 589.500$ at $p = 0.347$). However, the importance of PA for romantic relationships changes ($U = 456.500$ at $p = 0.021$). The importance of PA for romantic relationships increases significantly in the group of men aged 21–25.

4. The multiple regression analysis using data from the entire sample of the study participants indicated that independent VO variables determined 30.5 % ($R^2 = 0.305$) of the variance of the variable of 'importance of PA for friendships' and 38.3 % ($R^2 = 0.383$) of the variance of the variable of 'importance of PA for romantic relationships'. The index indicates the degree of impact of each of the predictors at their significance level of $p < 0.05$. The predictors affecting the 'importance of PA for friendships' are VOs toward recognition, respect, and exerting influence over others ($\beta = 0.310$, $t = 3.955$ at $p = 0.000$) and VO toward PA ($\beta = 0.315$, $t = 4.061$ at $p = 0.000$). The significant predictors affecting the 'importance of PA for romantic relationships' were VOs toward recognition, respect, and exerting influence over others ($\beta = 0.324$, $t = 4.377$ at $p = 0.000$) and VO toward PA ($\beta = 0.319$, $t = 4.371$ at $p = 0.000$). We observed an inversely proportional effect between the 'importance of PA for romantic relationships' and VO toward communication ($\beta = -0.207$, $t = -3.099$ at $p = 0.002$).

5. The multiple regression analysis for subgroups with low and high levels of importance of PA for friendships and romantic relationships indicated that VOs had no significant effect on a low level of importance of PA for friendships, but had a significant effect on a high level of importance of PA for friendships (Table 2). VOs explain 63.4 % ($R^2 = 0.634$) of the variance of the variable of 'high level of importance of PA for friendships'.

6. Among VOs that have a significant impact on the 'high level of importance of PA for friendships', we may distinguish VOs toward recognition, respect, and exerting influence over others ($\beta = 0.324$, $t = 2.717$ at $p = 0.009$) and VO toward health ($\beta = 0.418$, $t = 3.112$ at $p = 0.003$). We observed an inverse relationship between the high level of importance of PA for friendships and VO toward love ($\beta = -0.605$, $t = -3.971$ at $p = 0.000$).

Table 2

Intensity of the impact of value orientations on different levels of importance of PA in friendships and romantic relationships

	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Standard error
Dependent variable – high level of importance of PA for friendships				
Model	0.796 ^a	0.634	0.532	0.3416
Dependent variable – low level of importance of PA for romantic relationships				
Model	0.829 ^a	0.687	0.557	0.0717
Dependent variable – high level of importance of PA for romantic relationships				
Model	0.521 ^a	0.272	0.107	0.4540

a. Predictors: VOs – PA; communication; help and mercy to others; health; high social status and managing others; seeking beauty and enjoying it; learning new things about the world, nature, and human; high level of material well-being; love; pleasant pastime, leisure; recognition, respect, and exerting influence over others; social activity to achieve positive changes in society.

7. VO toward help and mercy to others ($\beta = 0.386$, $t = 2.495$ at $p = 0,016$) and VO toward health ($\beta = 0.270$, $t = 1.922$ at $p = 0.060$) can markedly affect the high level of importance of PA for romantic relationships.

8. The hierarchy of intensities of the impact of VOs on the importance of PA include: 1) VOs toward recognition, respect, and exerting influence over others; VO toward PA; 2) VOs toward social activity, high social status, and managing others; 3) VOs toward material well-being, seeking beauty and enjoying it.

9. VOs toward recognition, respect, exerting influence over others, and health exert significant impacts on the 'high level of importance of PA for friendships'. The core of VOs affecting the high level of importance of PA for romantic relationships includes VOs toward help and mercy to others and VO toward health.

10. The other value orientations (see Table 2, list of VOs) examined in this study do not significantly affect the low and high levels of importance of PA for friendships and romantic relationships.

Discussion

The evidence regarding gender and age-related differences in the importance of PA is partially consistent with the findings on the conflicting effects of these factors (Quittkat et al., 2019). The present study confirms the evidence that women are more oriented toward PA than men (Lee et al., 2017). However, our results do not support the view that the importance of PA decreases with increasing age in men. In our study, we found that as men move into the age group of 21–25-year-olds, the importance of PA for romantic relationships increases significantly. Our findings are consistent with those of other authors (Quittkat et al., 2019; Jarry et al., 2019; Laus et al., 2018) regarding the relative constancy of women's scores of orientation toward PA, which are not significantly altered with age and the type of interpersonal relationship.

The results of the comparative-hierarchical analysis of the impact of VOs on the importance of PA in interpersonal relationships do not have any correlation to previous research in the psychology of external appearance. However, they are comparable to those works (Chae, 2022; Gervais et al., 2020; Heider et al., 2018; Izydorczyk et al., 2021) that examine the impact of various factors on the severity of orientation toward PA. In contrast to existing works, in our study predictors included VOs, levels of importance of PA, and types of interpersonal relationships – friendships and romantic relationships. The contribution of this study to the issue of predictors of the importance of PA in interpersonal relationships is that the hierarchy of intensities of the impact of VOs on importance of PA is not constant. This hierarchy is determined by the type of interpersonal relationships. The intensity of the impact of certain VOs changes in accordance with the level of importance of PA.

In the field of applied social psychology, *the practical point of view* is that this study contributes to a better understanding of the role of dominant VOs entailing problems associated with high importance of PA, which, in turn, may negatively affect various areas of human existence. Consequently, the reduction of traumatic changes in everyday life can be provided by means of the 'VOs – importance of PA' connection. *A promising direction for further research* is the correlation of VOs with various gender and age-related predictors and determination of their impact on various levels of importance of PA and expansion of the spheres of being. Further research is needed to determine the impact of VOs and other socio-psychological factors on the importance of PA and their subsequent impact on subjective well-being.

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V. A. Labunskaya contributed to research methodology and edited the text of the manuscript (70 %).

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Author Details

Vera Alexandrovna Labunskaya – Dr. Sci. (Psychology), Professor, Department of Social Psychology, Academy of Psychology and Pedagogy, Southern Federal University, Rostov-on-Don, Russian Federation; Scopus Author ID: 6506616515, ResearcherID: A-7526-2016, SPIN code: 4365-4921, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8901-8773>; e-mail: vlab@aanet.ru

¹ Editorial note: Facebook is an online social media owned by Meta Platforms, recognized as an extremist organization and banned in Russia since 2022.

Oksana Romanovna Gura – Intern Researcher, Academy of Psychology and Pedagogy, Southern Federal University, Rostov-on-Don, Russian Federation; ResearcherID: AAE-2405-2019, SPIN code: 9610-4431, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3484-5004>; e-mail: grv999@mail.ru

Conflict of Interest Information

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.