Zygomorphic flowers have fewer visitors

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ABSTRACT

Botanists have long identified bilaterally symmetrical (zygomorphic) flowers as having more

specialized pollination interactions than radially symmetrical (actinomorphic) flowers.

Zygomorphic flowers facilitate more precise contact with pollinators, guide pollinator behaviour,

and exclude less effective pollinators. However, to our knowledge, whether zygomorphic flowers

are actually visited by a smaller subset of available pollinators has not been broadly evaluated.

We compiled 53,609 plant visitation records in 159 communities around the world and classified

the plants' floral symmetry. Globally and within individual communities, plant species with

zygomorphic flowers do indeed have fewer visitors. Likely as a consequence of this difference,

however, zygomorphic flowers share a somewhat larger proportion of their visitors with other

taxa in the same community. The structures of visitation sub-networks for plants with different

floral symmetry, and full networks with varying proportions of zygomorphic flowers, also differ

in ways that may arise from differences in visitor diversity. These results provide context for

widely documented associations between zygomorphy and diversification and imply that species

with zygomorphic flowers may face greater risk of extinction due to pollinator loss.

INTRODUCTION

One of the textbook axioms of pollination ecology is that flowers with bilateral symmetry are more specialized than flowers with radial symmetry [1–4]. What this means, however, can vary widely with context. "Specialization" may refer to a derived character state in a phylogenetic context [1,3], or to the degree to which a flower manipulates pollinator behaviour [5] — or it may refer to association with a smaller set of available pollinators than seen for other comparable plant taxa [6]. It is well established that zygomorphic flowers are derived within the angiosperms [7,8], and extensive research examines how floral structure attracts, guides, or excludes pollinators [5,9–12]. However, data addressing the third sense in which zygomorphic flowers are specialized — association with fewer pollinators than otherwise expected — are surprisingly sparse.

Floral symmetry has been recognized as an important feature of angiosperm diversity since at least the 18th Century [4]. Modern treatments identified zygomorphy as derived, and hypothesized that zygomorphic forms facilitate greater consistency of pollinator visitation, and thus more effective pollination [1,3,13]. Zygomorphy is associated with greater net rates of speciation [14,15], consistent with the hypothesis that using fewer pollinators creates more opportunities for reproductive isolation [16]. Greater specialization based on symmetry might also interact with global patterns of diversity, such as latitudinal gradients [17,18]: recent syntheses find evidence that biotic interactions are stronger in the tropics [19,20], though assessments of latitudinal effects on pollination specifically have mixed results [21,22].

However, to our knowledge, direct documentation that zygomorphic flowers associate with fewer

pollinators is restricted to anecdotal observations (e.g. Takhtajan 1969; Stebbins 1974; Fenster et

al. 2004). Broad confirmation of this understanding would illuminate the extensive research

linking pollination associations to diversification [1,13,15,16,23]. Ecologically, greater pollinator

specificity for species with zygomorphic flowers implies that they should have smaller

geographic ranges and be more prone to local extinction due to pollinator loss. But this is all

conjecture without data showing that zygomorphic flowers do actually tend to have fewer

pollinators.

If floral symmetry creates systematic differences in pollinator associations, these differences

could be expected to manifest in the structure of plant-pollinator visitation networks. Plant-

pollinator associations have been prominent case studies in the development of ecological

network theory, including network structure and assembly [24–26], global patterns of

biodiversity [21,22], and evolutionary stability against species losses [27]. The structures of

association networks provide community-level perspective on the diversity of pollinators visiting

flowers with particular traits, and public databases of plant-pollinator association compiled for

studies of network structure have global coverage to examine pollinator number and sharing

among co-occurring angiosperm taxa. Here, we test the hypothesis that zygomorphic flowers

have more specialized pollination in a global dataset of floral visitation networks, comparing the

number of floral visitors and examining differences in the structure of association networks for

plant taxa with actinomorphic or zygomorphic floral symmetry.

METHODS

We compiled floral visitation networks from Web of Life (www.web-of-life.es) and the Interaction Web DataBase (www.nceas.ucsb.edu/interactionweb) repositories, identified unique plant taxa (typically species) across all networks, and classified their floral symmetry based on taxonomic knowledge, formal descriptions of species or higher taxa, and, when necessary, inspecting images of herbarium sheets or reliably identified fresh flowers. In some cases, we classified symmetry not based on individual flowers but on whole flowering heads (e.g., we considered species in the Asteraceae actinomorphic). We removed taxa from the working dataset if we were unable to find authoritative descriptions or images, or if they were wind-pollinated. Data and sources are provided in the Dryad archive (Dryad DOI here).

We conducted analysis in R v. 3.6.2 [28]. For each plant species in the dataset, we totalled the number of unique visitors observed for each, and calculated visitor sharing as

$$\frac{\sum_{j=1}^{n} s_{ij}}{(n-1)}$$

Where s_{ij} is the proportion of visitors to plant i that also visit plant j, $i \neq j$, in a community of n plants. We calculated network structure metrics for complete communities, and for the sub-networks of visitors to plants in each community with each type of floral symmetry. We calculated nestedness, connectance, web asymmetry, and coextinction curves [29] for full networks and sub-networks using the `networklevel()` function of the `bipartite` package [30], and quantified modularity using a short-random-walks algorithm implemented in the `cluster_walktrap()` function in the `igraph` package [31].

To test for phylogenetic signal in floral symmetry, visitor counts, and visitor sharing, and to

control for phylogeny in subsequent analysis, we mapped taxa in our dataset to a recently

published supertree of the seed plants [32]. We tested for phylogenetic signal using the

`phylosignal` package [33], estimating Blomberg's K and K* [34], Abouheif's C_{mean} [35],

Moran's I [36], and Pagel's λ [37] statistics. We performed principal component analysis of the

phylogenetic distance matrix for all plant taxa and used phylogenetic distance principal

components as covariates in Bayesian regression models fitted to explain variation in visitor

count and sharing.

We tested the hypotheses that visitor count and visitor sharing differed with respect to floral

symmetry by fitting and comparing Bayesian multilevel regression models using the `brms`

package [38,39]. Competing models explained variation in pollinator count, pollinator sharing,

or network structure metrics with a group effect of source network identity and possible

population effects of floral symmetry and latitude. For regressions fitted to pollinator count and

sharing metrics of individual taxa, we also included the first two principal components of the

phylogenetic distance matrix (which jointly explained 65% of variation) as population effects

alongside network identity, latitude, and floral symmetry. We estimated model fit in terms of the

expected log pointwise predictive density (ELPD) using the leave-one-out cross-validation

method implemented in `brms` with the `LOO()` function [40].

Figure 1. The global plant visitation dataset. (A) Global distribution of the plant-visitor networks in our compiled dataset, with points scaled to indicate relative size, in terms of plant taxa. (B) Bar plots giving the number of plant taxa for each network, coloured according to floral symmetry annotation (left, full dataset, right, all networks except for the largest, to provide better visibility. (C) Visitors per plant across the whole dataset, grouped by floral symmetry (one-tailed Wilcoxon test, p = 0.002). (D) Visitor sharing for each plant across the whole dataset, grouped by floral symmetry (one-tailed Wilcoxon test, p = 0.004). (E) Visitors per plant, averaged within sub-networks for plants with differing symmetries, versus the latitude of the network location; grey lines link points for actinomorphic and zygomorphic taxa from the same network.

RESULTS

We compiled 159 plant-visitor networks, recording 53,609 observed visits to 2,734 angiosperm

taxa, from online repositories (Figure 1A; Supplementary Table 1), then classified plant taxa in

this dataset as having either actinomorphic or zygomorphic flowers. Globally, and across

individual networks, zygomorphic species were a minority: Out of 2,668 species for which we

could identify floral symmetry, 488 (18%) were zygomorphic; only five networks had more

zygomorphic than actinomorphic species, while 70 lacked any zygomorphic species (Figure 1B).

Across all observed visits in the dataset, the number visitors to plants having zygomorphic

flowers was significantly smaller than that for plants having actinomorphic flowers (median 4

pollinators per plant with zygomorphic flowers versus 5 per plant with actinomorphic flowers;

$p = 0.002$ in a one-tailed Wilcoxon signed-rank test; Figure 1C). At the same time, taxa with

zygomorphic flowers shared a somewhat higher proportion of their visitors with other taxa in the

same community (median 0.20 for zygomorphic versus 0.18 for actinomorphic, $p = 0.004$;

Figure 1D). We found significant phylogenetic signal for floral symmetry across all statistics

($C_{mean} = 0.33$, Moran's $I = 0.02$, $K = 0.05$, $K^* = 0.05$, and $\lambda = 0.50$; $p < 0.001$ for all); but

pollinator count metrics only showed significant deviations from the null models for C_{mean} and λ

($p < 0.001$ for each; $p \geq 0.05$ for all others).

In 39 networks comprising 46,026 floral visitation records, there were a sufficient number of

plant taxa (at least five) with each type of symmetry to compare sub-networks for flowers with

different symmetry — that is, to compare the diversity of floral visitors for plants with different

symmetry having access to the same pool of possible pollinators, and the structure of networks

for plants with differing symmetry. Zygomorphic sub-networks had significantly fewer mean

visitors per plant (one-tailed paired Wilcoxon test, $p < 0.001$; Figure 2), but only marginally

greater visitor sharing ($p = 0.06$). Zygomorphic sub-networks differed from actinomorphic sub-

networks in a variety of structural metrics (Figure 2), having significantly greater connectance

($p < 10^{-4}$), greater web asymmetry ($p < 0.001$), greater nestedness ($p < 10^{-5}$), and greater

modularity ($p < 0.001$), and lower coextinction robustness, as measured by the exponent of the

coextinction curve, for both plants ($p < 10^{-5}$) and visitors ($p < 10^{-5}$). Among 89 complete

networks including at least one zygomorphic plant taxon, a greater proportion of zygomorphic

plants was significantly associated with greater visitor sharing (Figure 2B; Pearson's product

moment correlation on log-transformed values = 0.22, $p = 0.04$), greater connectance (cor = 0.21,

$p = 0.04$), lower web asymmetry (cor = -0.26, $p = 0.01$), and greater visitor coextinction

robustness (cor = 0.27, $p = 0.01$); but the proportion of zygomorphic flowers was not correlated

with the mean number of visitors per plant, networks' nestedness, modularity, or plant

coextinction robustness.

The best-fit Bayesian regression model explaining variation in the number of visitors to each

plant included floral symmetry, latitude, an interaction between symmetry and latitude, and

phylogeny in addition to the group effect of network identity, estimating a significant negative

main effect of zygomorphic symmetry ($R^2 = 0.28$; ΔELPD ≥ 5.4 versus all other models;

Supplementary Tables 2, 3). The best-fit model explaining variation in visitor sharing included

floral symmetry, phylogeny, and the group effect of network identity, and was a significantly

better fit to the data than any model including an effect of latitude; this model had a significant

positive effect of zygomorphic symmetry ($R^2 = 0.66$; ΔELPD > 6 versus all other models;

Supplementary Tables 4, 5).

Figure 2. Floral symmetry and plant-visitor network structure. (A) Comparisons of subnetworks created based on floral symmetry, for mean number of visitors per plant, visitor sharing, connectance, web asymmetry, nestedness, modularity, and coextinction robustness from the perspectives of both plants and visitors, with indications sub-networks differ significantly based on one-tailed paired Wilcoxon tests. Gary lines link points representing zygomorphic and actinomorphic sub-networks from the same source network. (B) Scatterplots of the relationships between the proportion of zygomorphic flowers in a network and the set of network structure metrics in A; linear regression lines (white with grey shading indicating 95% CI) are given for all cases in which the correlation is significant with $p \leq 0.05$.

DISCUSSION

The classic hypothesis of floral symmetry is that zygomorphic flowers have more specialized pollination, meaning that they are visited by fewer pollinator species. We find that, globally and at the level of individual association networks, plants with zygomorphic flowers do indeed have

fewer visitors, and that the visitation networks of plants with zygomorphic symmetry differ from

the networks of plants with actinomorphic symmetry in ways that may arise from this difference

in pollinator diversity (Figure 1C,D; Figure 2). In particular, sub-networks of plants with

zygomorphic flowers show significantly greater connectance, greater web asymmetry, greater

nestedness, greater modularity, and lower coextinction robustness for both plants and visitors

(Figure 2A); and full visitation networks in which more plant taxa have zygomorphic flowers

show broadly parallel patterns, with the exception of a positive correlation between proportion of

zygomorphic flowers and visitor coextinction robustness (Figure 2B). Floral symmetry, visitor

count, and visitor sharing show significant phylogenetic structure; and visitor count is correlated

with latitude north or south (Figure 1E), such that plants in communities farther from the equator

have more visitors regardless of their floral symmetry, though the correlation with latitude is

somewhat smaller for zygomorphic taxa. Bayesian multilevel regression modelling that accounts

for these potential confounding effects nevertheless finds significant effects of floral symmetry on

visitor count and visitor sharing.

The visitation network data we examine here have notable limitations for assessing pollination

specialization, because they treat visitation as a binary, while in reality floral visitors vary

considerably in their effectiveness as pollinators. Thus, the effective pollinators of the plant

species in our dataset are likely a subset of the recorded visitors. Our metric of visitor sharing,

similarly, may not reflect the relative "constancy" of associations between effective pollinators

and plants — that is, the degree to which pollinators continue to visit flowers of a particular

species over multiple visits in a foraging trip, a key concept in the theory of plant-pollinator

specialization and pollinator-mediated reproductive isolation [1,16]. This may explain why our

visitor sharing metric is higher for zygomorphic flowers. Rather than capturing constancy in the

sense of pollinator foraging behaviour, visitor sharing is inherently limited by the number of

visitors to a plant species: species with fewer visitors likely share a larger proportion of them

simply because, arithmetically, fewer visitors represent a given proportion of sharing. The

positive association between visitor sharing and zygomorphy is also likely a reflection of

network structure; like other mutualistic networks, plant-visitation networks are generally nested

[26], so the fact that zygomorphic species tend to have fewer visitors means that their visitors are

more likely to be relatively generalized, visiting many other plant taxa.

An association between floral symmetry and pollinator count is partly attributable to shared

history, but this does not exclude the possibility of correlated evolution — phylogenetic

correlations should arise if the evolution of zygomorphy is accompanied by a reduction in

pollinator number. Possible evolutionary causes for this pattern are the subject of an extensive

literature on angiosperms' coevolution with animal pollinators [1,5,14–16]. Selective benefits to

floral forms that control pollinator access include reduced receipt of heterospecific pollen [1,16]

and more effective transfer of conspecific pollen [5,41]. An ecological association between floral

symmetry and pollinator diversity also provides quantified ecological context for documented

associations between floral zygomorphy and diversification [14,15,42]. The causal relationship,

however, remains ambiguous. It may be that association with a smaller set of pollinators creates

more opportunities for the evolution of reproductive isolation [1,16,42]; but it may also be that

more specialized pollination associations allow lineages to subdivide other axes of ecological

variation more finely [15,23].

Our results also have important implications for conservation work. Despite significant

uncertainty surrounding the current magnitude of global insect defaunation, pollinators are

widely known to be in rapid decline due to pesticide use, habitat degradation, and emerging

infections [43,44]. As we find, zygomorphic species may be more vulnerable to coextinction as

pollinators decline and may be more responsible for pollinator co-extinctions if they themselves

are lost (Figure 2A). Although the patterns we find are coarse and variable at the community

level, simple rubrics for triage are critical for conserving the 300,000+ species of angiosperms,

most of which will never benefit from individualized conservation assessment. Perhaps more

importantly, our results offer support for the idea that "compartments" of the global plant-

pollinator network must be targets for holistic conservation, focused on preserving interactions

and functionality where the network is most fragile [45].

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DATA, CODE, AND MATERIALS

Floral symmetry annotations, visitor counts and sharing, and network structure statistics have

been uploaded to the Dryad repository, DOI 10.5061/dryad.3j9kd51df

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interests.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

JBY and CJC conceived and designed the study; GG annotated plants' floral symmetry with

supervision from JBY, and JBY and GG conducted analysis with code provided by CJC; JBY

drafted the paper in consultation with CJC and GG. All authors gave final approval for

publication and agree to be held accountable for the work performed therein.

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