

Physically Attractive Individuals Are Perceived as 'Good' Through The Study of Socially
Desirable Characteristics.
Nirali Maru

Abstract

Research has suggested that attractive individuals are perceived as more socially and intellectually competent than unattractive individuals. In other words, "what is beautiful is good". A sample of 384 undergraduate students, rated attractive and unattractive faces presented as Facebook profile pictures on a range of socially desirable characteristics, including those associated with social and intellectual competence. One-tailed paired samples *t*-test revealed the attractive faces were perceived as more socially competent compared to unattractive faces, and that attractive faces are perceived as more intellectually competent compared to unattractive faces, reinforcing the stereotype "what is beautiful is good". This study therefore helps us understand the way in which individuals perceive attractiveness and associate it with positive personality traits.

It has been demonstrated that “what is beautiful is good”, that is, physically attractive individuals tend to be perceived as, and are expected to have more socially desirable personality traits, compared to less attractive individuals (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972). Socially desirable traits include being sociable, kind, interpersonally warm, trustworthy and intelligent (Dion et al, 1972).

Dion and colleagues (1972) undertook a study asking participants to rate three photographs of undergraduate students on various personality traits and behaviour characteristics. One photograph represented the face of an attractive individual, whilst the others were faces of average and unattractive individuals respectively. Participants perceived the attractive individual as possessing more socially desirable characteristics, such as social and intellectual competence, and as leading a more successful life, when compared to the average and unattractive individuals. A variety of studies, described below, have supported this idea that attractive individuals have more socially desirable characteristics than unattractive individuals.

Lorenzo, Biesanz and Human (2010) carried out a study on undergraduate students at the University of British Columbia. Students were divided into 10 groups and met with every other participant in their group for three minutes, assessing social competence and intellectual competence in making first impressions. Lorenzo and colleagues found a statistically significant result, consistent with the stereotype that “beautiful is good”. They suggested that these positive characteristics benefit attractive individuals from enhanced positivity and accuracy of impressions.

Lemay, Clark, and Greenberg (2010) conducted three studies evaluating three models to explore the stereotype that “beautiful is good”. These three studies were based on personality traits, interpersonal qualities and maintenance of relationships with attractive individuals. In the first study participants judged the individuals on the photographs, and it was found that attractive individuals were identified as having more desirable interpersonal qualities, and that the participants associated attractiveness with positive traits and affiliation motivation. In the second study, participants were found to see their attractive romantic partners as having positive traits, which would facilitate relationship maintenance; and the third study explored participants’ own desire to bond with attractive individuals. All three studies found significant results reinforcing the stereotype “beautiful is good”.

Based on Dion and colleague’s findings (1972), the present study focused on two socially desirable characteristics, social competence and intellectual competence, through the use of Facebook profile pictures.

The objective of this study was to test the stereotype “what is beautiful is good”. Specific to the current study, it was hypothesised that, a) attractive individuals are perceived as more socially competent compared to unattractive individuals, b) attractive people are perceived as more intellectually competent compared to unattractive individuals.

Method

Design

This study utilised a within-subjects design to examine effects of physical attractiveness on perceived social and intellectual competence. The dependent variables were perceived social competence and intellectual competence. Social competence was viewed as having characteristics such as sociable, likeable, interesting and friendly, while intellectual competence was seen as intelligent, hardworking and successful.

Participants

The total number of participants for this study were 384 undergraduate students studying Psychological Science Experimental Methods (PSEM) at Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia. There were 77 males and 306 females, with one participant classifying themselves as part of the ‘other’ gender category. All participants were over the age of 18 years ($M = 20.0$ years, $SD = 1.78$). Three hundred and fifty-nine participants were identified as Facebook users ($M = 0.93$, $SD = 0.25$), and on average had 613 Facebook friends each. Participants were awarded with course credits for participation. Sensitivity power analysis

using G*Power 3.1 (Berscheid, Faul, Erdfelder & Lang, 2014) indicated sufficient power (0.80) to detect small differences in perceived social and intellectual competence ($d > 0.14$) between attractive and unattractive individuals, at an alpha level of .025 (Bonferroni corrected for multiple comparisons), one tailed.

Materials

Participants were able to access the online questionnaire using a computer, tablet or a smart phone. All data were collected and stored online. Four faces were used from the CAL/PAL database, one male and one female in the highly attractive category and, one male and one female in the low attractive category (Ebner,2008). The participants were asked to rate the attractiveness of the individuals on the profile pictures on a 10-point scale, from 1 ‘very unattractive’ to 10 ‘very attractive’. A manipulation checks indicated that our participants rated the ‘attractive’ faces ($M = 5.74, SD = 1.51$) as significantly more attractive than the ‘unattractive’ faces ($M = 2.96, SD = 1.39$), $t(383) = -35.00, p < .001, d = 6.00$. Participants were to rank components of social competence (included sociable, likeable, interesting or friendly) and intellectual competence (intelligence, hard work and success) on a 6-point scale, from Unsociable (1) to Sociable (6). Cronbach’s alpha for social competence was .80, and for intellectual competence was .81.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through emails sent by the lecturer which provided a link directing them to the online questionnaire. The study was completely anonymous. After indicating whether or not they were a regular Facebook user, participants were presented with each of the four faces, in a counterbalanced order, which they rated on each component of social and intellectual competence. They then rated the attractiveness of all four faces, and concluded by answering some brief demographic questions.

Results

Analysis of the data was conducted on SPSS Version 22. A one-tailed, paired samples *t*-test, with an alpha level of .025, supported the first hypothesis, as the attractive faces were perceived as significantly more socially competent ($M = 4.12, SD = 0.55$) than the unattractive faces ($M = 3.03, SD = 0.70$). As illustrated in Table 1, this effect was very large. Assumption testing identified slight violations of normality, however, the sample size was amply large, hence the test was robust against these violations.

Consistent with the second hypothesis, a second one-tailed, paired samples *t*-test (alpha = .025) indicated that the attractive faces were perceived as significantly more intellectually competent ($M = 3.96, SD = 0.63$) than the unattractive faces ($M = 3.27, SD = 0.75$). This effect was also very large (see Table 1).

Table 1

Summary of Means Differences, Standard Deviations of Mean Differences, and Paired Samples t-test scores for Social and Intellectual Attractiveness and Unattractiveness

Measure	M	SD	95% CI	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig.	<i>d</i>
1. Social Attractive- Social Unattractive	1.09	.76	[1.01, 1.17]	27.96	383	< .001	1.74
2. Intellectual Attractive- Intellectual Unattractive	.70	.81	[.61, .78]	16.90	383	< .001	1.01

Note: 95% confidence interval of the difference between two means.

Discussion

This study aimed to extend Dion, and colleagues' (1972) study, and has revealed that people do perceive physically attractive individuals as having desirable characteristics compared to unattractive individuals. Results support the two hypotheses, through statistical significance and large effect sizes, that a) attractive individuals are perceived as more socially competent as compared to unattractive people, and b) attractive individuals are perceived as more intellectually competent as compared to unattractive people, reinforcing the “what is beautiful is good” stereotype. Knowledge about attractiveness based on previous literature such as that conducted by Dion and colleagues (1972), Lorenzo and colleagues (2010) and Lemay and colleagues (2010), allows us to understand that perceived physical appearances are used to assist in making assumptions about people such as “beautiful is good”, that is attractive people may be more socially and intellectually competent compared to unattractive people.

A possible limitation of this study was the method in which participants were recruited since all the participants were students studying psychology from the same university, and thus the current study's results may only generalise to university student populations. Hence, further research needs to be conducted to generalise the findings to other populations such as comparing gender differences, or a wider range of age group. A possibility for further research may also explore other personality traits such as integrity, along with social competence and intellectual competence. Conclusively, the following study supports findings identified by Dion and colleagues (1972), Lorenzo, Biesnz and Human (2010) and Lemay, Clark and Greenberg (2010), where physically attractive individuals are perceived as possessing more socially desirable personality traits, and hence maintaining the stereotype “beautiful is good”.

References

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