

Effects of The “What is Beautiful is Good” Stereotype on Perceived Trustworthiness

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ABSTRACT

Attractive individuals are favored in various evaluative and judgmental ways. This study examined the effects of the “what is beautiful is good” stereotype on the specific area of perceived trustworthiness. 284 undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory level psychology class at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse participated in an online survey, which rated one of three sets of four attractive and unattractive photographs of both men and women with respect to how likable, attractive, and trustworthy they perceived the stimulus to be. Next, the participants chose which stimulus they would trust the most in a hypothetical situation. Results indicated that attractive individuals were seen as more trustworthy than unattractive individuals and women were seen as more trustworthy than men. When participants were forced to choose among the four pictures in a trust scenario, they overwhelmingly chose the attractive females. Findings from this study should help inform others of possible gender and attractiveness judgmental biases being made regarding trustworthiness.

Keywords: stereotype, trustworthiness, attractiveness, gender

INTRODUCTION

Individuals are faced with many important decisions in everyday life where they are either being judged or judging others. Physical attractiveness plays a major role in decision-making in situations such as romantic partner choices, hiring decisions, and voting behavior (Langlois & Kalakanis, 2000). It is essential to further examine and increase awareness of this attribution bias. The effect of attractiveness on the specific area of perceived trustworthiness is a relevant and important topic for further research. Increased awareness of this association may allow people to begin limiting biases caused by judgmental errors.

Physical attractiveness is a complex construct that reflects many important factors. Research indicates that facial attractiveness is one of the key determinants of overall ratings of attractiveness (Pansu & Dubois, 2002). Facial attributes associated with attractiveness are even coloring, smooth, pliant skin, clear eyes, and shiny hair, which are all signs of being healthy (Thornhill & Gangestad, 1999). In terms of the face itself, symmetry, averageness, and masculinity and femininity all increase perceived attractiveness (Thornhill & Gangestad, 1999). Assessments of facial attractiveness are similar across different cultures, sexes, and ages (Cunningham, Roberts, Barbee, Druen, & Wu, 1995).

Attractive individuals are favored in various evaluative and judgmental ways. The “what is beautiful is good” stereotype may be explained by the halo effect. The halo effect illustrates the tendency for a single attributed perception of an individual to influence other perceptions about that individual. In regards to the “what is beautiful is good” stereotype, humans frequently attribute positive characteristics to attractiveness and negative characteristics to unattractiveness (Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991). This stereotype leads to systematic human perceptual biases and inaccurate judgmental and attribution errors.

Hatfield and Sprecher (1986) argued that psychology research has consistently supported the phenomenon that people believe attractive people are more likely to possess a wide variety of positive qualities, such as intelligence and likeability. Attractive individuals are often they are even given more lenient sentences in mock trials. Contrary to these findings, Eagly and her colleagues (1991) suggested that in rare but predictable situations, negative characteristics are attributed to being attractive. Cash and Janda (1984) labeled this side of attractiveness as the “what is beautiful is self-centered” stereotype because attractive people may be perceived as vain and self-centered. When further examining this topic men were found to possess negative social attributes such as sternness, and women were associated with negative intellectual qualities such as naïveté (Eagly et al., 1991).

Trust and Trustworthiness

Researchers and theorists often mention trust as an important component for effective human relations and communication. Obstructions to trust should be seen as problematic and need to be further examined (Nishishiba & Ritchie, 2000). Kasper-Fuehrer and Ashkanasy (2001) explain that trust is a phenomenon that encompasses diverse constructs, such as ethics, morals, emotions, values, and attitudes. Colquitt, Scott, & LePine (2007) define trust as a psychological state based on the intention of accepting vulnerability to another individual based on positive expectations of his or her actions. Trustworthiness is the characteristic of inspiring trust and is an interactive process that ultimately predicts and determines trust levels. It affects, monitors, and guides members' actions and attitudes in their interactions with one another (Fuehrer & Ashkanasy, 2001). Trustworthiness has no objective criteria and is therefore a subjective state. Communication scholars argue that when an individual perceives another as credible or trustworthy, there will be less suspicion, which will therefore enable the individual to be more open and receptive to the other (Szulanski, Cappetta, & Jensen, 2004). Trust and trustworthiness are fundamental pillars for efficient interactions and are important aspects to thoroughly evaluate for more accurate judgments (Sutter & Kocher, 2005).

The identification of attribution errors that may potentially be made when detecting trustworthiness in others on the basis of physical appearance and gender could be found as beneficial for social interactions and judgments. Easily observable features, such as attractiveness or gender, can be used to categorize individuals based upon stereotypes (Jones, Moore, Stanaland, & Wyatt, 1998), and these perceptions are often instantaneous, instinctive, and automatic attributions (Willis & Todorov, 2006). First impressions can be crucial lasting impressions that form the foundation upon which relationships are built (Jones, Moore, Stanaland, & Wyatt, 1998).

The current study intends to further examine the predicted positive effects of the "what is beautiful is good" stereotype on perceptions of trustworthiness. It is hypothesized that the "what is beautiful is good" stereotype will hold true when applied to judging perceived levels of trustworthiness in attractive and unattractive faces. Furthermore, it is also hypothesized that gender differences will show that males are perceived as more trustworthy than females. Despite the fact that attractiveness may hold some negative qualities, attractive individuals are generally favored in today's society. Given the importance of trust in personal and business interactions, it is important to understand the role of automatic and/or stereotypic categorizations that are based on gender and attractiveness on perceptions of trustworthiness.

METHOD

Participants

An online survey was emailed to approximately 310 undergraduate students from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse enrolled in an introductory psychology class, of whom 284 (62 males, 185 females, and 37 not indicated) participated. Given the typical demographics of the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, the ages of the individuals included in the sample most likely ranged from 18 to 22 years old and were primarily Caucasian American. The participants were randomly selected from the course's student directory and contacted by email asking for participation in the study.

Materials and Procedure

Prior to the initiation of the study, pilot work was conducted. This involved participant ratings of 12 models made up to be attractive and unattractive. The six male and six female models that determined to show the greatest discrepancy on attractiveness were used for the study.

Participants clicked a link within the invitation email that led them to the survey. They read an informed consent statement and indicated their consent before beginning the experiment. Each participant viewed one randomly selected set of photographs from each of the four groups identified in the pilot study (attractive male, attractive female, unattractive male, and unattractive female). Photographs measured approximately three inches by five inches. Participants rated each photograph on trustworthiness, likeability, and attractiveness using a 7-point scale (0 = not at all, 6 = very). On the final screen all four photographs were displayed (see Figure 1). The participants were asked to choose which of the individuals they would trust the most in the hypothetical situation of lending the individual their money with the promise to return it with interest. Although the pictures varied between each set, the scenario remained the same. Results reflected ratings of each type of model across the three sets (e.g. ratings of all attractive women) to reduce reliance on one stimulus. Based on Hornton's (2003) research, no time limit was imposed. The experimental session concluded with a full debriefing.

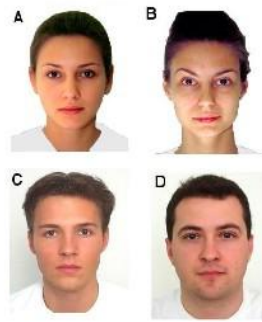


Figure 1. Example photo set

RESULTS

A within subjects linear model analysis found significant main effects for attractiveness and sex of photo as well as gender of participant (see Table 1). Males were more likely than females to find the stimulus attractive ($M = 3.94$ as compared to 3.62); however, there were no gender of participant interaction effects found. Attractive individuals were seen as more trustworthy than unattractive individuals and women were seen as more trustworthy than men. In addition, there was a significant interaction effect, where attractive women were seen as the most trustworthy (see Figure 2). When participants were forced to choose among the four pictures in a trust scenario, they overwhelmingly chose the attractive females (see Table 2).

Table 1. Within and between participants analysis of perceptions of trustworthiness

Source	Trustworthiness	
	df	F
Within Subjects		
Sex (photo)	1	13.60***
Attractiveness (photo)	1	3.60*^
Sex X Attractiveness	1	95.87***
Error	245	(1.51)
Between Subjects		
Gender of Participant	1	4.51*

Note: Values enclosed in parentheses represent mean square errors.
 *^ one-tailed $p < .05$.; * $p < .05$.; ** $p < .01$.; *** $p < .001$

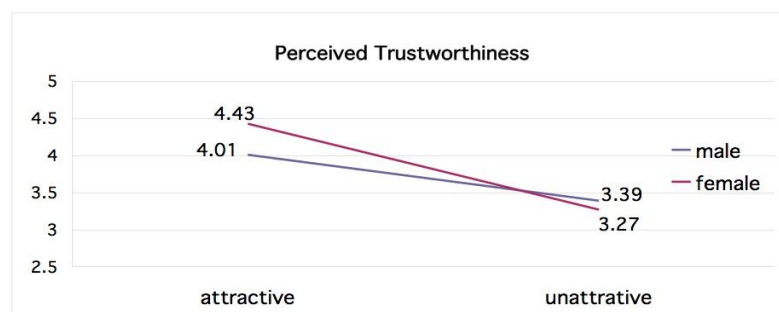


Figure 2. Trustworthy rating as shown by sex and attractiveness of photo (based on 7-point scale)

Table 2. Percent of participants by gender in forced choice condition that chose each option

	Participant Gender	Percent
	Attractive Female	68%
	Unattractive Male	16%
Total	Attractive Male	13%
n = 247	Unattractive Female	3%
	Attractive Female	58%
	Unattractive Male	26%
Male	Attractive Male	13%
n = 62	Unattractive Female	3%
	Attractive Female	72%
	Unattractive Male	14%
Female	Attractive Male	10%
n = 185	Unattractive Female	4%

DISCUSSION

The hypothesis that attractive individuals would be seen as more trustworthy than unattractive individuals was supported. However, contrary to the hypothesis, women were seen as more trustworthy than men. Despite the general assumption that men are favored in today's society, there appears to be select areas where they may be given a negative bias, such as trustworthiness. Perhaps, attractiveness has more influence on the judgments of women than men.

The most prevalent limitation among the study was the lack of diversity within the sample and the survey. Future research may further explore the relationship between the "what is beautiful is good" stereotype and gender, as well as different types of trust scenarios. Findings from this study should help inform others of possible gender and attractiveness judgmental biases being made regarding trustworthiness, allowing future limitations of judgmental errors.

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