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What is beautiful is good, even online: Correlations between photo attractiveness and text attractiveness in men's online dating profiles

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ABSTRACT

Attractive people are considered by others to have many positive qualities and in the case of social skills and intelligence, these attributions are often true. In internet dating, individuals with attractive profile photos are viewed more favorably overall, but no research has yet established whether they indeed have more positive qualities. We addressed this issue by having 50 women independently rate 100 photos and free-written texts taken from males' profiles on a popular dating website. Photos rated as physically attractive had profile texts that were rated as more attractive, even though photos and texts were rated by different judges. Perceived confidence seemed to play a mediating role, suggesting that attractive men write appealing texts because they are aware of their high mate value. Thus, contrary to popular belief, the internet does not seem to "level the playing field."

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1. Introduction

What is beautiful is often seen as good. In other words, attractive people are often perceived as having positive qualities (Dion, Bersheid, & Walster, 1972). In fact, some research shows that what is beautiful actually is good in certain ways (Feingold, 1992). In an internet dating context, research shows that profiles with attractive photos are judged as more attractive overall (Fiore, Shaw Taylor, Mendelsohn, & Hearst, 2008b). However, no one has demonstrated whether online daters with attractive photos also have other attractive qualities, as conveyed in their profile texts. In fact, one popular impression of the internet is that it "levels the playing field" by allowing individuals' appealing personalities to shine, even if they are not physically attractive. To address this issue, we asked whether qualities apparent in profile photos are correlated with qualities of the written text, when judged independently.

The claim that "what is beautiful is good," also known as the physical attractiveness stereotype, originated from a study by Dion et al. (1972). In this study, participants received photographic stimuli of previously rated attractive, average, and unattractive target individuals. Participants then rated these targets on various qualities such as sensitivity, warmth, sociability, and level of adjustment. Results showed that participants rated the more attractive targets as more likely to possess socially desirable personalities than the less attractive individuals. Also, participants rated the more attractive people as more likely to be successful in life, such as getting married and obtaining a high status job, than the unattractive people.

Subsequent decades of research have supported and clarified this effect. Meta-analyses by Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, and Longo (1991) and Feingold (1992) found that people tend to attribute positive qualities to attractive people, although the effect is limited to certain domains. Specifically, attractive people are typically perceived as being more competent, intelligent, socially-skilled, and well-adjusted. An additional meta-analysis by Langlois et al. (2000) showed that this effect is not limited to perception by strangers but extends to perception by well-known others. Finally, the physical attractiveness stereotype has also been found to occur in reverse, such that people rate the same photograph as more physically attractive if it is accompanied by a favorable description of the person than if it is accompanied by an average or unfavorable description (Gross & Crofton, 1977). In sum, people tend to think physically attractive individuals have other attractive qualities.

A related line of research has indicated that the physical attractiveness stereotype does have some basis in reality, again in limited domains. Feingold (1992) found that good-looking people were in fact more popular and socially skilled than unattractive people. Langlois et al. (2000) also indicated that attractive people, both children and adults, were more socially skilled and well-adjusted (mentally healthy), as well as more successful and somewhat more intelligent.

At least two kinds of explanations exist for the finding that attractive people seem to possess more positive personal qualities than unattractive people. First, social learning theory explains this effect based on the self-fulfilling prophecy (Langlois et al., 2000; Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977). This particular stereotype is

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self-fulfilling because when we perceive attractive individuals to have more socially desirable traits, we actually treat them better. Attractive people may then internalize the belief that they have superior traits, and may in fact behave in a way that confirms these beliefs. Thus both the attractive person and the interaction partner get confirmed in the "prophecy" that the attractive person is of superior quality.

Snyder et al. (1977) performed an experiment which demonstrated the multi-stage process of this stereotype's self-fulfilling nature. In this study, undergraduate men communicated with women over the telephone. Before communicating, the men viewed a profile and photo, purportedly of the woman with whom they were about to speak. In reality, the photo was someone else, prerated as attractive or unattractive. They then completed a questionnaire about their predictions about the woman's personality. The men adhered to the physical attractiveness stereotype: attractive women were predicted to be more sociable, poised, humorous, and socially adept than unattractive women. In the subsequent phone conversation, when men believed they were interacting with an attractive woman, they tended to be more friendly and sociable than those men who believed they were interacting with an unattractive woman. The women's behaviors then mirrored the men's: the women in the "attractive" condition also behaved in a friendlier and more sociable manner than those in the "unattractive" condition. Thus, men had assumptions that attractive women would behave in a socially desirable manner and were therefore friendlier to them, which led the women to respond positively, reinforcing the stereotype.

Although the self-fulfilling prophecy has documented effects on people's behavior, it also begs an important question: Where does the "prophecy" come from that a physically attractive person will have positive traits? Perhaps there is a grain of truth from which this stereotype arises. A second explanation for the finding that attractive people have some better-than-average traits comes from evolutionary theory, and may help answer this question. In particular, "good genes" theory suggests that positive qualities will often cluster together, as they are all individually borne of having a good genotype, relatively free from mutations (e.g., Howrigan & MacDonald, 2008; Scheib, Gangestad, & Thornhill, 1999). In other words, the same high quality that makes you beautiful might make you smart and socially skilled, as well. This argument is particularly proposed for men, as women have been especially choosy in selecting for good genes qualities over the generations (Trivers, 1972). Many physical indicators of good genes in males, such as muscularity and body symmetry, have been shown to cluster together (Folstad & Karter, 1992; Frederick & Haselton, 2007; Scheib et al., 1999; Thornhill & Gangestad, 1999). More recently, several mental fitness indicators, including intelligence, creativity, and sense of humor, have been proposed to indicate good genes (Haselton & Miller, 2006; Miller, 2000; Prokosch, Yeo, and Miller, 2005). In support of this possibility, body symmetry has been shown to correlate with general intelligence (Furlow, Armijo-Prewitt, Gangestad, & Thornhill, 1997). One goal of the present study was to investigate the degree to which potential mental fitness indicators, such as intelligence and sense of humor, actually correlate with physical attractiveness.

In the current culture, many people make their first impressions with potential romantic partners online. Most of the popular online dating websites boast tens of millions of unique users, and one study estimates that 13% of marriages in 2009 resulted from meeting on one of the many online dating websites (eHarmony, 2009). The large majority of the studies on the physical attractiveness stereotype have used static photos of the face and/or body (Eagly et al., 1991), similar to the type used for online profiles. Thus, the physical attractiveness stereotype presumably also occurs in online dating contexts. At the very least, the photograph associated with an online profile is a major influence on people's opinions of the profiles. For instance, one study found that the attractiveness of the profile photo was the strongest predictor of participants' judgments of the profile's overall desirability (Fiore, Lindsay, Mendelsohn, & Hearst, 2008a). Lundy, Tan, and Cunningham (1998a) argue that this bias happens especially more often in men's judgments of women than in women's judgments of men, but Fiore et al. (2008) found a strong effect for both sexes. Because good genes arguments apply more to men than to women (Miller, 2000), we opted in the current study to focus on women's judgments of men's profiles.

The self-fulfilling prophecy has also been demonstrated in an internet dating context. Gueguen, Lourel, Charron, Fischer-Lokou, and Lamy (2009) replicated Snyder et al. (1977) study with college males who were given a constructed web personal advertisement. Men who viewed profiles including attractive versus unattractive photos tended to write longer introductory emails which contained fewer spelling and grammatical errors. Further, female judges read the emails and were more likely to say they would respond to men in the attractive condition than the unattractive condition. These findings indicate that men viewing an attractive photo behaved in a way that indicates more interest in the woman, and in a way that is likely to elicit a better response in return.

Contrary to these findings, it is a popular claim that the internet "levels the playing field" for relatively unattractive individuals. For example, on one website, this statement appears: "The best thing about the Internet is... [that] a person's personality can show through, what you are inside gets a chance to shine without getting overpowered by what you are outside" (http://www.wiredsafety.org/internet101/aromance.html, retrieved 10/27/10). Similarly, in an article on the development of relationships online, Levine (2000, p. 525) claims, "The online world gives those people who do not fit a stereotypical model of human beauty a chance to be Don Juans and Carmen Mirandas and have an equal opportunity to be found desirable." However, if what is beautiful really is good, then attractive people are also likely to have profile texts that are socially adept, and that display intelligence and perhaps a good sense of humor. Thus, those with the most appealing texts (judged independently of photos) are likely to be those with the most appealing photos (judged independently of texts). To examine this issue, we asked women to rate a number of photos and a number of free-written texts taken from males' profiles on a popular dating website. We hypothesized that physical appearance would correlate with positive characteristics of the written texts, despite being judged independently.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 50 female psychology students from a mid-sized University in the mid-Atlantic region, who ranged in age from 18 to 24 years ($M = 19.04$). Participants identified as Caucasian/non-Hispanic (74%), Hispanic (10%), and African American (4%). Additionally, 4% identified with more than one ethnicity, and one person (2%) each identified as Asian, Indian, Pacific Islander, and "other" ethnic categories. For compensation, Introductory psychology subjects had the choice of course credit or entry into a drawing for a $25 gift card to Target department store; all others were automatically entered into the drawing.

2.2. Materials

We used 100 profiles and their corresponding photos, posted by men on a popular online dating website. The profiles were selected from 22- to 25-year-old men in the New York City and Seattle areas.

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