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## **Is Beauty Only Skin Deep?: The Relationship Between Personality and Attractiveness Ratings**

The present study examined whether positive and negative personality traits influenced attractiveness ratings for pictures of men and women. In the first phase, fifty-two participants rated 80 photographs of men and women (half attractive; half unattractive) solely on their attractiveness (0-9 scale, with 9 being extremely attractive). Two to four days later, the same participants were asked to learn and remember four personality descriptions (two negative; two positive) paired with four different photographs. All photographs were of the opposite sex of the participant and all had appeared in the first phase. Following the learning task, participants were given a surprise attractiveness rating task for the four photographs. When positive personality traits were paired with the photos, the attractiveness ratings increased significantly for both attractive and unattractive pictures, whereas attractiveness ratings remained stable across phases in the negative trait condition.

Are attractiveness ratings independent of personality or does personality influence an individual's attractiveness? More specifically, do positive personality traits positively influence attractiveness ratings, and do negative personality traits negatively influence attractiveness ratings? Does the rater's gender influence the attractiveness ratings when paired with a positive or negative personality? The current study was designed to explore these questions.

Past research suggests that personality and attractiveness are linked. For instance, Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo (1991) conducted a meta-analysis which explored the stereotype that

attractive people also possess favorable personality traits. Generally, they found that participants in these studies attributed more favorable personality traits and more successful life outcomes to attractive rather than unattractive targets, however the overall magnitude of the effect was moderate and varied across traits. In particular, attractive people typically are viewed as much more socially and intellectually competent than unattractive people, but they do not differ on measurements of integrity and concern for others (Eagly et al., 1991). Moreover, a separate meta-analysis by Feingold (1992) suggested that physically attractive people typically were perceived as more dominant, sexually warm, and mentally

healthy than unattractive people. They were also rated as less lonely, less socially anxious, more popular, and more sexually experienced than unattractive people (Feingold, 1992). Clearly, a person's attractiveness influences our immediate perceptions about his or her personality.

Does this relationship also work in the opposite direction? That is, can knowledge about personality traits influence our perceptions about a person's attractiveness? In one study, Paunonen (2006) examined the effect of personality traits on a variety of physical attractiveness ratings. Participants read a description of a male or female target in which intelligence, independence, and honesty were manipulated to be high or low. Next, they were shown a picture of the target and asked to rate them on their physical characteristics. Results indicated that the honesty characteristic exerted a significant influence on attractiveness ratings—targets high in honesty were perceived as more physically fit, as being healthier, and as having a more kind, feminine, and attractive face.

Although the Paunonen (2006) study shed some initial light on the question, we chose to explore the topic further with a two-phase experiment. In the first phase, male and female participants viewed 80 photographs of attractive and unattractive people (half women; half men). They were asked to rate the physical attractiveness of each person on a nine-point scale, where higher numbers reflected greater attractiveness. We then imposed a two to four day delay in the experiment, which allowed time for participants to forget their specific ratings to the photos in phase one. In the second phase, participants were instructed that they were participating in a learning and memory task. Four brief personality descriptions were created that commented either negatively or positively on each of the Big 5 personality traits (Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism). Descriptions were paired with attractive and unattractive photos of the opposite sex (positive-attractive; positive-unattractive; negative-attractive; negative-unattractive). Participants were asked to learn the descriptions/photo pairing for a subsequent memory test. At the conclusion of the learning and memory phase,

participants were surprised with a final attractiveness rating task for the four photographs. Given that the four photos were rated in phase one, we had pre-personality and post-personality measures for each photograph so that we could assess the influence of the personality descriptions.

Given that women tend to be more empathic than men (Fisch, Homer, Galiardo, & Zabolotnaia, 2008), we presumed that personality would be more salient for women than for men. Accordingly, we predicted that, following a positive personality description, female subjects would rate both attractive and unattractive males higher than their initial rating, whereas following a negative description, both attractiveness ratings would decrease. In contrast, we hypothesized that personality would not influence men's ratings of the attractive and unattractive women.

## Method

### Participants

Fifty-two Lake Forest College undergraduates completed both phases of the experiment. Participants were obtained using convenience sampling. Specifically, students were approached while studying in the library and asked to spend 5-10 minutes assisting with a student research project for a psychology course. Participants provided their contact information at the conclusion of phase one and were contacted two days later to schedule phase two.

### Materials

Eighty pictures were obtained from the website <http://www.hotornot.com>—a website in which the public can make attractiveness ratings of the site's members. The website used a Likert-type scale ranging from 1-10 and recorded the number of ratings each photo received. We operationally defined a person as attractive if their photograph received an average website rating of 9.0 to 10.0 and unattractive if the average was between 5.0 and 6.0. Only pictures of people ages 18-25 with at least 200 ratings were used. In all, forty male and forty female pictures were selected; half of each sex were attractive and half were unattractive. Photos were converted to black-and-white and were

cropped so that only a person's head and shoulders were visible.

Personality descriptions were derived using the five dimensions of the Big 5: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism (e.g., John, 1990). Five-sentence descriptions (one sentence for each dimension) were created and were either entirely positive or entirely negative (see Appendix 1). Four female and four male photographs (half attractive; half unattractive) were chosen from the phase one materials and were paired with the personality descriptions. Participants received one positive attractive, one positive unattractive, one negative attractive, and one negative unattractive pairing. The specific pairings were balanced across participants. All stimuli were presented and all data was collected using IBM-compatible computers running the E-Prime programming software.

### **Procedure**

All participants conducted the experiment in a library computer lab at Lake Forest College. In phase one, participants read instructions on the computer, which directed them to rate each of the 80 pictures based solely on physical attractiveness. Pictures were displayed for 1.5 seconds and were followed by a screen prompting participants to make their rating. A Likert-type rating scale of 0-9 was used, where 0 = very unattractive and 9 = very attractive. At the conclusion of the phase one, participants were thanked for their cooperation and sent on their way.

Phase two occurred two to four days after phase one. Participants read instructions on the computer, which directed them to read and memorize the brief personality descriptions associated with a certain picture. The photo-description pairs were presented individually for as long as the participant desired. Upon pressing the button for the next screen, participants were given a chance to practice recalling the information they learned. The just-presented picture was shown and participants were asked to answer the question (to themselves), "what do I remember about this person." After 10 seconds, the next photo-description pair was shown and the process was repeated until all four pairs were presented. Next, participants were shown the

pictures again and were asked to make six separate ratings (see Appendix 2; all used 0-9 scale)—the critical rating, of course, was the attractiveness rating. At the end of phase two, participants were informed of the true purpose of the study and that there was no memory test.

## **Results & Discussion**

The data for the present experiment are displayed in Figure 1. Four separate 2 (phase: 1 vs 2; within-subjects) x 2 (participant gender: male vs. female; between-subjects) mixed factor analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were used to explore the attractiveness data. First, the ANOVA for the positive-attractive condition revealed a significant main effect of phase,  $F(1,50) = 23.329$ ;  $p < .05$ , where mean attractiveness ratings increased reliably from phase 1 (5.15) to phase 2 (6.87). The main effect of participant gender was also significant,  $F(1,50) = 8.238$ ;  $p < .05$ , and reflected that male participants gave higher overall ratings than females. The interaction was not statistically significant. The ANOVA for the negative-attractive condition showed a similar pattern of performance for mean attractiveness. Specifically, these ratings increased significantly from 2.86 to 3.82 across the two phases,  $F(1,50) = 7.297$ ;  $p < .05$ . In contrast, however, female participants provided reliably higher ratings in this condition,  $F(1,50) = 11.506$ ;  $p < .05$ . These variables did not interact with one another. Overall, the data suggest that positive personality ratings enhance the attractiveness of both attractive and unattractive people.

The main effects of phase failed to reach significance in either the negative-attractive (5.69 vs. 5.76) nor the negative-unattractive (2.76 vs. 2.76) ANOVAs and there was no main effect of participant gender in the negative-unattractive condition (all  $F$ 's  $< 1$ ). The negative-attractive ANOVA, however, revealed a main effect of participant gender with men providing higher ratings,  $F(1,50) = 23.265$ ;  $p < .05$ . Neither of the interactions was statistically significant. Clearly, the data suggest that negative personality traits have no influence on attractiveness ratings for attractive or unattractive people.

## General Discussion

We began this research project by asking whether personality influences attractiveness ratings. Based on the data, we concluded that personality can influence attractiveness ratings, but only in a positive direction when a person possesses positive personality traits. That is, people are viewed as more attractive if they have positive personalities. In contrast, negative personality traits do not appear to influence attractiveness ratings; no adverse or beneficial effects were found in the current study.

Initially, we hypothesized held that personality would exert a strong influence on females' ratings of attractiveness, whereas ratings by males would not be influenced by personality. As stated earlier, the gender of the rater did not matter—for both, only positive personalities affected attractiveness ratings. Hence, our hypotheses were not fully supported. There does not appear to be a gender difference in how personality affects attractiveness ratings.

Although the experiment was methodologically sound and the data were reliable, we hesitate to generalize too much from one study. In the future, researchers could conduct the research with a larger sample from a larger population to help ensure external validity. Other researchers also might want to control for sexual preference, instead of simply providing opposite-sex photos in phase 2, which certainly would increase the study's internal validity.

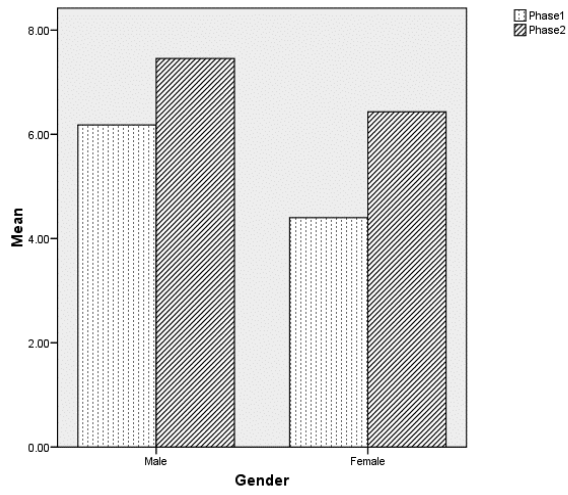
While our hypothesis was not fully supported, we determined that personality can play a role in perceived physical attractiveness. Positive personality traits increase perceived attractiveness for both attractive and unattractive people and negative personality traits do not seem to effect perceived attractiveness for either attractive or unattractive people. Clearly, much more research needs to be done in this area.

## References

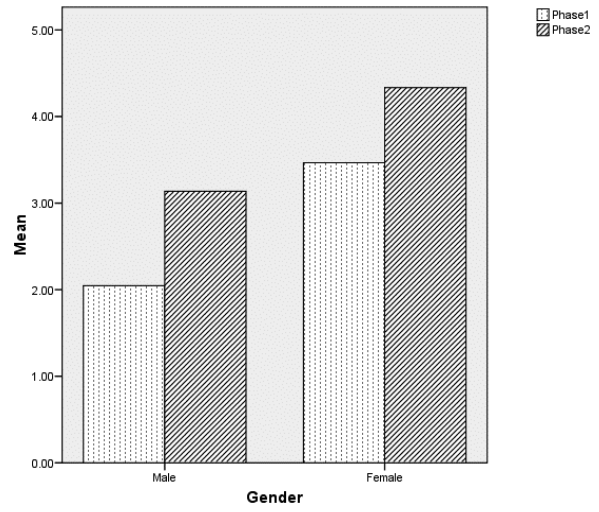
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Figure 1

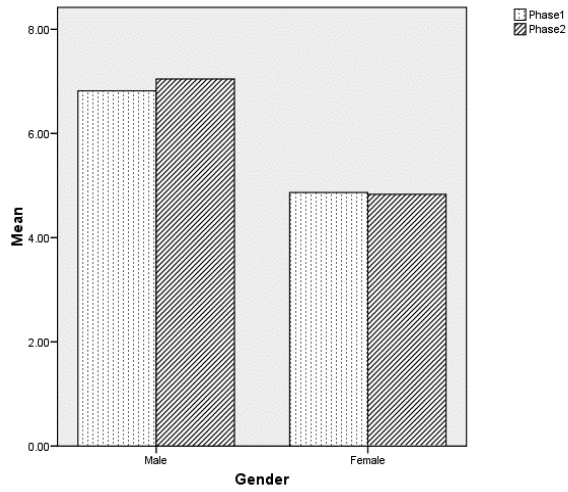
Attractive Positive



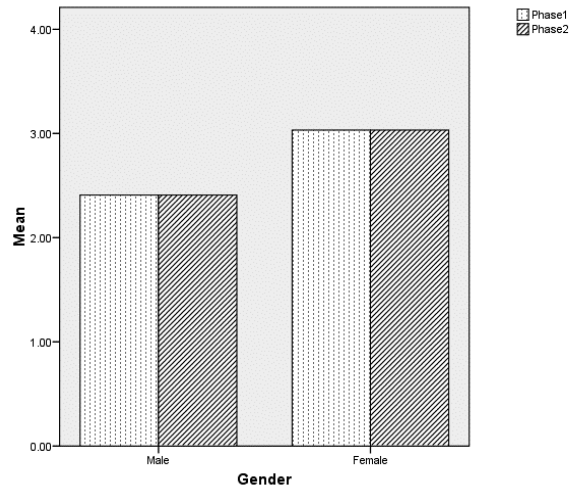
Unattractive Positive



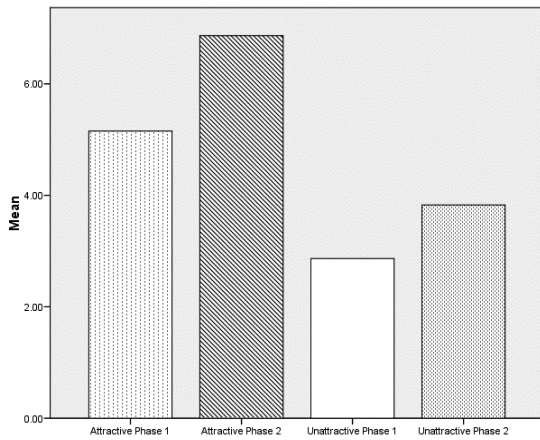
Attractive Negative



Unattractive Negative



Attractive and Unattractive Positive



Attractive and Unattractive Negative

