

Beauty Stereotypes among College Students

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## **Abstract**

From first glance, we begin to make assumptions about a person's personality characteristics based on their appearance. There may be trends within the qualities that are most often attributed to attractive and unattractive individuals. To explore this topic, we will be conducting one-on-one interviews that utilize open-ended questions. These scripted questions shape a conversation in which participants can explain how their attraction toward a made-up individual may impact their perception of the person's personality. Attributing certain qualities to individuals based solely on their perceived attractiveness can be harmful to those who are given more opportunities based on their appearance. It is commonly understood that unattractive individuals have been looked down upon when compared to attractive individuals. Therefore, we need to be aware of these stereotypes so we can challenge harmful biases. One-on-one qualitative interviews will be used to collect data on people's assumptions in these scenarios.

Stereotypes are commonly recognized as positive or negative oversimplified ideas or beliefs about a person or people group based off assumptions. This definition is based off various dictionaries and academic sources such as the Oxford English Dictionary, Merriam-Webster Dictionary, and the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. We begin to form impressions of people based on their clothes, body, hair, skin, and more. It may be possible that we also begin to attribute positive or negative qualities to these individuals based on their perceived attractiveness. Therefore, if someone is deemed attractive, they may be favored simply due to this physical trait. For this research proposal, the agreed upon definition of physical attractiveness will be the degree to which a person's physical features are considered aesthetically pleasing or beautiful in the dominant mainstream context. Believing in these stereotypes could lead to unfair advantages and disadvantages. For this reason, it is important to be aware of these biases when they exist. The long-term goal of this research is to understand if people attribute positive qualities/personality characteristics to attractive individuals and negative qualities/personality characteristics to unattractive individuals? The results of this study will be valuable to personality and social psychologists as well as related fields in breaking stigmas and/or stereotypes that plague our society.

## **Literature Review**

### **Categorizing Attractive Faces**

The presence of facial symmetry as a measure of beauty has long been associated with perceived attractiveness in our culture. It is often used as a moderating variable in many experiments surrounding this topic due to its salience. Noor and Evans (2003) conducted a study on the effects of facial symmetry on perceptions of personality and

attractiveness. They examined their hypothesis that “symmetry signals health” to assess whether or not correlations support these claims. All photographs, also referred to as targets, were female and of various race and ages. The raters, also known as the participants, were made up of 121 male and female undergraduates. The targets were photographed, and their faces were manipulated to be symmetrical and free of blemishes. Asymmetrical versions of these targets were also created by shrinking or bulging certain facial features.

The study was a within-subjects design in which the participants would view a pair of faces and then be asked to list the differences that they saw between the two. This part of the study was designed to measure the salience of symmetry manipulation. They found that symmetry manipulation did have a significant effect on the participants’ ratings of personality. The asymmetrically manipulated faces were rated as less agreeable than the normal faces. Symmetrically manipulated faces were rated as more conscientious. No significant differences were found for extraversion or openness. However, Noor and Evan’s (2003) results suggested no evidence that attractiveness alone was responsible for these personality ratings. Therefore, further research is still needed to understand how personality characteristics affect the unconscious biases that occur when an individual is perceived as attractive.

In an experimental study Ramsey et al. (2004) examined if 6-month-old infants could categorize attractive faces. Their study was based on past findings surrounding beauty stereotypes. Ramsey et al. (2004) defines stereotypes as “generalizations about a group that are based on cognitive categories. Perceivers use these beliefs in social situations when processing information about individuals (p. 201).” The researchers make

the argument that many adults are aware of stereotypes and therefore must have acquired this information at some point in their lives. Though stereotypic beliefs can be taught, they can also be acquired implicitly. For the purpose of this study, Ramsey et al. (2004) used the attractiveness stereotype, which they defined as the visual preference for attractive faces. To assess their hypothesis, the researchers conducted four related studies.

In studies 1 and 2 Ramsey et al. (2004) had infant participants look at stereotypically attractive and unattractive faces. The longer an infant looked at the face, the more attractive they were said to have found that face. In study one, it was found that infants did spend more time looking at the attractive face after being familiarized with the unattractive face first. However, the results of study two demonstrated that when first familiarized with the attractive face, the infant would spend more time looking at the unattractive face. The results of the second study did not refute the hypothesis because the results were likely due to the novelty of the unattractive face. These results do, however, suggest that 6-month-old infants can categorize attractive and unattractive faces into two separate groups. The results of experiments 3 and 4 suggested that these results occurred due to the infant's ability to recognize similarities between faces “equal in attractiveness” and differences between faces “unequal in attractiveness.” (Ramsey et al., 2004, p. 208) These results suggest that infants can categorize attractive and unattractive faces into two separate groups. This distinction is important because it means that they have the capacity to see these differences as good or bad. If an infant perceived an unattractive face as bad, they have the potential to grow up with prejudice towards stereotypically unattractive individuals. These results have obvious importance due to the harm that stereotypes have been known to create.

## **Attraction and Personality**

Little et al. (2006) examined if desired personality traits had the potential to influence a participant's preference for a certain face. This study takes a backwards approach to develop a causal argument that possessing positive personality traits can make a face attractive. Composite faces were created as representations of desired personality traits by utilizing 139 model faces acquired from magazines. All faces selected were young, white, without piercings or glasses, and their hair was cropped out. The desired qualities were sexiness, warmth, assertiveness, competitiveness, easy-going nature, extraversion, maturity, relaxed nature, scatter-brained nature, and responsible. Participants would rate these faces for attractiveness on a 7-point scale and then completed a questionnaire assessing their partner preferences. A photograph of two of these models was presented and the experimenter would then ask the participant "Which of the two faces looks most X" (X representing the desired trait) for each of the 10 traits. The participants would then demonstrate their desire for certain personality traits (Little et al., 2006).

It was found that some personality characteristics were desired over others, for instance, warm and easy-going traits were valued more for both men and women (Little et al., 2006). Gender differences in these desired traits were also found, wherein females desired higher levels of assertive, mature, relaxed, and lower levels of scatter-brained (Little et al., 2006). These results suggest that perceived personality preferences can alter a participant's preference for these faces. Valued traits may be causal in making an

individual's face attractive. Little et al. propose that if a culture values a certain trait, then they will perceive these traits more readily in attractive faces (2006).

Similarly, researchers Fink et al. (2006) looked at judgments of attractiveness and personality. The moderating variable that they assessed was facial symmetry. Bilateral facial symmetry has often been a highly valued aspect of physical attractiveness in some cultures. In fact, facial symmetry is often perceived as the “ability of an individual to cope with the challenges of their environment (p. 491)” according to Fink et al.'s (2006) research. This may mean that people assume everyone is born with symmetrical faces and those who end up with asymmetrical faces do so because they encountered danger or other environmental issues. They also studied whether facial symmetry played a role in the attribution of certain personality traits.

Stimuli faces were all Caucasian females aged 18-25 randomly selected from a database. The faces had neutral expressions and were without make-up or piercings. These faces were then presented to each participant who would then rate them on 10 adjectives using a Likert scale. The adjectives used by Fink et al. (2006) were: attractive, healthy, sociable, intelligent, dominant, lively, careful, self-confident, balanced, and anxious.

The results confirmed their hypothesis that symmetrical faces would be perceived as more attractive, healthy, and with positive personality attributes. Fink et al. (2006) found that the more asymmetrical faces were perceived as being more anxious.

In a dissertation investigating modern colorism Kelly (2022) looked at the impacts of manipulated skin tone, attractiveness, gender, and race on perceived personality traits. Skin tone biases and their relation to attractiveness could be a key

factor in colorism. The researchers acknowledged that perceptions of attractiveness can impact trait associations. An initial pilot study was used in which participants rated photos of targets along with stereotype traits. This pre-test study utilized an attractiveness manipulation in which photos of targets were examined and rated by participants along with perceived attractiveness. Kelly (2022) found that there were no statistically significant differences between the target photographs that would skew the results of the following experiments.

The 2 (participant gender) x 2 (manipulated attractiveness) x 2 (target gender) x 3 (skin tone: light, dark, or white) between-subjects design was conducted online with a sample of 1,027 male and female African Americans. Participants were instructed to rate these target photos along with stereotype traits. Kelly (2022) found that Black women compared to Black men may disfavor light skin toned over dark skin toned African Americans. Male participants preferences were mediated by their sexual attractiveness ratings of targets. Results of this study suggested that skin tone can play a key role in preferences, expectations, attraction, and stereotyping.

### **Negative Consequences of Beauty Stereotypes**

A series of two experiments were conducted by Griffin and Langlois (2006) to measure the directionality of the attractiveness stereotype. This study was constructed due to the past findings that perceptions based on attractiveness can lead to negative consequences. Every participant in experiment one was instructed to view slides of different faces while also completing a judgment task. The results supported their theory that unattractiveness is bad is more salient than the theory that beauty is good. In Griffin and Langlois's second experiment, they sought to replicate their results in a younger



population. They found identical results in the second experiment. These unattractive faces were perceived as less sociable, altruistic, and intelligent based on their appearance alone. Therefore, in both adults and children, it is “more often the case that unattractiveness is “bad” than that beauty is “good (p. 8).” This means that unattractive individuals are at a greater disadvantage than those who are perceived as attractive to any degree.

Rohner and Rasmussen (2012) looked at the role of recognition bias in the physical attractiveness stereotype. Recognition bias, as defined by Rohner and Rasmussen, is “the tendency to categorize both old and new items as old (p. 239)” In this context, recognition bias dictates whether or not a person perceives an attractive individual to have better qualities than an unattractive individual. To address this role, they conducted two experiments. Experiment 1 studied the influence of response type and attention. The results of this portion of the study suggested that participants demonstrated a tendency to respond more to physically attractive stereotype congruent word combinations. Experiment two was created to assess the effect of eight additional moderating variables. Rohner and Rasmussen (2012) found that the only moderator that had a significant effect was the response type. These results suggest that people do have a recognition bias that is congruent with the physical attractiveness stereotype. This means that the physical attractiveness of an individual has the potential to increase the likelihood they will be perceived as having better qualities than an unattractive individual.

Though much of the research suggests positive perceptions of physically attractive individuals, other research conducted by Westfall et al., (2020) suggests the opposite. For instance, this research suggests that the threat to self-esteem could be a

moderating variable to these past theories. Westfall et al., suggests that individuals experiencing a threat to self-esteem will be more reliant on stereotyping. To test their hypothesis the researcher's recruited men and women to complete two tasks that they were told were unrelated. The first was a self-esteem inducing priming task. Following this task, the participants would watch and rate a slideshow of attractive and unattractive men and women. Participants in the low self-esteem condition believed that the unattractive individual possessed fewer positive qualities than the participants in the high self-esteem condition. Westfall et al.'s (2020) results showed that self-esteem does serve as a moderator in the physical attractiveness stereotype. Therefore, the results of the physical attractiveness stereotype can likely be influenced by another factors.

Some individuals are born with or acquire facial disfigurements that may lead people to consider them less attractive. Researcher Stone (2022) explored the negative perceptions of people with facial disfigurement. They assessed how these perceptions relied on a general attitude rather than specific concerns. They noted the “well-established preferences” for those with normal faces over these individuals. They used a version of the Implicit association test (IAT) to measure unconscious associations and preferences. This test pairs an image of a face with different sets of negative or positive words in the categories of attractiveness, health, social skills, emotional stability, and contribution. A control of non-disfigured faces was used as well to verify that results were due to the disfigurement rather than other factors.

The researcher, Stone (2022), found that a face closer to the norm would be perceived as more attractive. Their results also implied that these perceptions would

remain true even without personal acquaintance to the individual with or without the disfigurements.

### **Implicit and Explicit Attitudes**

Researchers McConnell et al. (2008) evaluated how social cues may have the power to dictate our judgments of others. They measured implicit and explicit attitudes toward individuals based on these associations. The three experiments McConnell et al. (2008) conducted by looking at obesity, physical attractiveness, and race contain important implications on attitudes, impression formation, and stigmas. These researchers wanted to know if group association cues had stronger impacts on implicit attitudes than on explicit attitudes. Experiment 1 examined these attitudes within those who are overweight. Obesity has long been considered as a stigmatized group. This experiment utilized photos paired with verbal behavioral statements. The participant would then tell the experimenter if the statements were characteristic or uncharacteristic of the target in the photo. McConnell et al. (2008) found that there were no differences between explicit or implicit attitudes when the target was not overweight. However, when the target was overweight the implicit attitudes towards them did demonstrate an association with obesity and negativity. In experiment 2 the researchers assessed three different targets. An attractive female, an average female, or an unattractive female were used to influence the participants' decisions. McConnell et al. (2008) found further evidence that backed up their results from experiment 1. The more attractive female was associated with more positive implicit attitudes regardless of her behaviors. Finally, in experiment 3 they looked at the implications of association by looking at race as a variable. They found that the targets race did lead to negative implicit attitudes from the participant. McConnell et

al. (2008) acknowledged the need for further research and development when it comes to impression and implicit attitude formation within individuals.

As discussed previously the “what is beautiful is good” heuristic is still very prevalent in our society. These and other implicit biases have sometimes been attributed to reasons for discrimination in the hiring process. Due to its prevalence researchers Paustian-Underdahl et al. (2016) examined when and why sex and attractiveness can have lasting impacts in the real world. More specifically they looked at how they have the potential to impact hiring judgments in corporate type jobs. They created a study to test Heilman’s lack of fit theory (1983) as a possible explanation for certain results. Historically, it has been found that when attractive women apply for stereotypically male dominated jobs they are viewed as less capable to be hired or promoted. Therefore, this finding was the foundation for these researchers’ study. Paustian-Underdahl et al. (2016) titled this theory the “beauty is beastly” effect. These perceived qualities are seemingly related to gender differences in hiring and promotion rates.

They hypothesized that attractiveness would enhance perceptions of men’s suitability when applying to these stereotypically male dominated fields. In turn, it would also reduce perceptions of women’s job suitability in these male dominated fields. Similarly, Paustian-Underdahl et al. (2016) thought that attractiveness as a factor could increase one’s perceptions of men’s job sustainability in these fields and decrease one’s perceptions of women’s job sustainability in these fields. The study utilized a between-subjects 2 (male or female) x 2 (more attractive or less attractive) x 2 (male job sex type or female job sex type) design. Participants in Paustian-Underdahl et al.’s (2016) study rated the targets in photographs on agency, job suitability, attractiveness, and a few other

control variables like age and sex. The researchers found that when female applicants who were applying to male-typed jobs were deemed attractive they were less likely to be hired. This does not mean that they were any less physically capable of doing the job, instead, they were simply perceived as being less likely to be successful based on their attractive appearance. It may be that the beauty is beastly effect is only activated when women apply for male-type jobs.

Most recently, Kranz (2023) addressed these person perceptions and associations between competence, warmth, and body size. To evaluate this, they created a study to investigate how body size alone can alter the ratings of a target's competence and warmth. They hypothesized that large targets would receive low competence ratings and high warmth ratings regardless of the targets gender. The study was a within-subjects 2 (male or female) x 3 (thin, average, or large) design. Six White targets were created using online software and were then morphed to represent one of the three body types used in this study. The participants were presented with the three body types and were then asked to rate them on size and two aspects of personality. These two aspects were competence and warmth.

In the results of the first study, Kranz (2023) found that thin targets received similarly low competence ratings as large targets. The average targets received the highest ratings of competence. Thin targets also received low warmth ratings when compared to the average targets. They attributed the results of the thin and overweight body type category to the idea that thinness may be associated with overcontrol problems and heaviness may be associated with under control. They did find a gender difference in which female targets received higher competence attribution than male targets.

Their second study investigated the impacts of these personality traits on impression formation. Kranz (2023) hypothesized that high competence targets would be perceived as thinner than low competence targets. Similarly, the researchers thought that high warmth targets would be perceived as larger than low warmth targets regardless of gender. This study used a 2 (female or male) x 2 (competence or warmth) x 2 (low or high) within subject's design. Kranz (2023) used 50-word vignettes describing targets. They then rate these targets based off body size, competence, and warmth.

The results of study two demonstrated that targets who were high in competence were rated as thinner than those who were said to have low competence. The results that Kranz (2023) found for warmth were not significant for this portion of the study. Therefore, associations between body size and competence are seemingly stronger than those with warmth. In fact, these results seemed to contradict the physical attractiveness stereotype. Larger body types were still capable of being associated with positive personality traits such as competence and warmth.

### **Literature Review Conclusion**

These studies do not necessarily create an adequate representation of people's perceptions in the area of physical attractiveness. Many of these past studies include visual components. These components can serve as an important baseline for attraction; however, many individuals do not agree when it comes to attraction. Diverse cultures, societies, and individuals have differing preferences when it comes to attractiveness. These preferences may not only apply to individuals choosing a potential partner, but they may also align with stigma by association. People may be hesitant to be associated with individuals they perceive as attractive because they do not want to be unattractive by

proxy. It appears to be relatively impossible to obtain visual targets that are equally attractive and unattractive to all participant types.

## **Rationale**

To fully understand how people perceive attractive and unattractive individuals we need to ask them directly. Visual components are an important aspect of these interactions; however, they may lead participants into answering a certain way. Therefore, it is important to see if these preferences for attractive individuals exist and to understand why we may be attributing positive personality characteristics to these people. To explore this topic, we will be conducting one-on-one interviews that utilize open-ended questions. These scripted questions shape a conversation in which participants can explain how their attraction toward a made-up individual may impact their perception of the person's personality. The results will show how biases towards attractive individuals may lead to unfair advantages. They could also demonstrate further which personality characteristics people attribute to attractive and unattractive individuals. If the hypothesis is confirmed it would be important to bring awareness to the biases that occur.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

As stated previously, one-on-one interviews will be conducted with participants to evaluate how attraction may play a role in preferences and assumptions. Interviews will be used to understand the current perceptions of beauty in college students. This method will create a conversation about the thoughts and beliefs concerning physical attraction. The nature of these interviews will also allow participants to explain their beliefs.

Additionally, personal interviews require participants to think on the spot, which may bring about more genuine answers.

The participants that will be included in this study will be college students above the age of 18. Minors will not be included in this study as they are unable to provide informed consent. This study is being conducted at a mid-sized Western New York college in which college students are the most readily available population. In past research the typical sample population lies around a mean age of 24. Therefore, it is best that college students are utilized to maintain age as a constant variable. We hope to attract many different races, ethnicities, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The maximum total number of participants that will be recruited for participation in this study is 20. All participants must be over the age of 18 and currently enrolled in college courses (in-person or online). To ensure the safety of participants, vulnerable populations will not be targeted in this study. Anyone who responds to the call for participants who states themselves to be within the age range and a student will be eligible to participate.

Participants will be recruited using snowball sampling methods. Social media posts, a recruitment e-mail and fliers will be used to attract participants. The fliers will be posted around campus inviting participants to contact the researcher for participation. The researcher will also post an image of the same flier on certain social media sites such as Instagram and Snapchat with the intentions of a snowballing effect. Physical fliers will be left on corkboards throughout campus after obtaining permission from the building administrators. Snowballing will take effect as individuals share the information with others. After an individual demonstrates interest in participation, the researcher will send the form of consent along with an outline of the topics they will be discussing. Then,



upon meeting the participant, the researcher will ask the participant to sign the informed consent document before beginning the interview.

### **Measure**

These interviews will be based off an interview guide that was created for the purpose of this study. The guide includes 10 questions, the first questions establish a baseline and background for the participant. The next series of questions run the participant through a scenario in which they are seeing a person for the first time. They will then be asked to make assumptions about that person's personality characteristics based on their attractiveness or unattractiveness. The interviews will act as a conversation in which the participant can discuss any thoughts, feelings, or experiences in the area of attraction and personality characteristics. This is the best method to gain the type of understanding that we are looking to obtain because it allows participants to speak freely and without any leading from visual components.

### **Design**

Twenty in-person interviews will be conducted with a diverse range of college student participants. However, online methods, such as zoom calls or phone calls, may be allowed due to COVID-19. These interviews will be audio recorded to ensure that all information is captured. If a participant does not consent to the use of audio recording, hand-typed notes will be used instead. These interviews will be one-on-one in which the researcher and the interviewee are the only one's present. This style was selected over a focus group interview due to the possibility that participants may "fake good." This is a type of response bias in which participants may respond in a way that makes them appear socially acceptable. To control for this factor the participants will meet with the

interviewer in a private location. There will be stringent rules put in place to ensure the participant feels the freedom to respond as truthfully as possible.

The first rule that participants who have agreed to be interviewed will be informed of is that nothing shared will leave the private space with their names attached. All participants should feel comfortable sharing without fear of judgment. Secondly it is important to inform the interviewees that there are no right or wrong answers. We will ask them to express any thoughts, experiences, insights, or opinions even if they do not think that other people will agree. Finally, the participants will be informed that the discussion will be audio recorded to capture as much information as possible. If they prefer not to be audio recorded, notes will be taken instead. These instructions are vital to the purpose of this study. If a participant does not feel that they can respond truthfully the data will not be reliable. A participant who responds untruthfully may be led to do so if these rules are not adhered to.

Once individuals agree to participate and sign the informed consent document, they will also fill out a brief demographic questionnaire. They will be asked to report their printed full name so that we may be able to assign them letters (e.g., participant A, participant B, participant C, and so on). Letters will allow us to refer to the participants anonymously throughout the transcribing and coding process. The questionnaire then allows them to report their sex, gender identity, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and academic major(s)/minor(s). General demographics are always needed; however, major/minor is desired specifically for the purpose of this study. We are curious to understand if gender differences play a role in participant responses. We also want to know if there is a trend in the types of majors/minors who respond one way or another. It

is possible that individuals who are more aware of unconscious biases and prejudice may respond with these pretenses. The conclusion of the demographics questionnaire asks the participant to sign and date the document to signify its completion. After its completion the interview will begin and will last around 30-45 minutes.

The interview guide was created for the purpose of this study. As discussed previously, the interview will begin with the signing of the informed consent and documenting the individual's demographic information. The Interview guide contains 10 questions developed to gain an understanding of the participants' feelings around attraction and perceived personality characteristics. The researcher then establishes an agreed upon definition of physical attractiveness. For the purpose of this study, physical attractiveness is defined as the degree to which a person's physical features are considered aesthetically pleasing or beautiful in the dominant mainstream context. Understanding this definition is vital to the purpose of this study. Participants can gradually begin to weave in their own definitions of physical attractiveness which may be biased due to their own personal experiences. The researcher will inform the participants of these preconceived notions and stereotypes of physical attraction for these reasons.

The questions begin by asking the participant to picture in their mind an objectively beautiful person. They are then asked to describe in detail the individual who comes to mind. The participant can answer in any way. For instance, they may discuss how that person appears by noting their hair, skin, clothes, or other physical attributes. On the other hand, participants may begin by describing their personality characteristics. They may bring up that this individual is funny, outgoing, and relaxed. Neither of these answers are wrong and answers outside of these responses are equally as important. The

data that is being gathered here simply needs to be the participants honest responses. The second question proposed asks the participant how important their own physical attractiveness is to them and why. This allows the researchers to gauge the values that the individual holds in this area. However, not all individuals hold themselves to the same standard that they hold others to. This is another aspect that we would like to learn more information about.

The next series of questions walk the participants through a scenario in which they are tasked to envision physically attractive individuals and make assumptions about them. The researcher will ask the participants to think about a physically attractive woman. They will instruct the interviewee to then picture in their mind the personality characteristics that come to mind. We then provide them with a setting in which they can imagine these scenarios occurring in their daily lives. The interviewees are then asked to imagine that on the first day of classes they see a physically attractive woman in their class. We then ask them to inform us of the kinds of personality characteristics this person would hold. To understand if there are gender differences we then ask if the perceived personality characteristics would differ if the physically attractive individual was a man. It is possible that the participants will claim the assumed personality characteristics were the same for both cases. However, it is also possible that participants may think attractive women are kind, caring, and generous whereas men are charming, competitive, and ambitious. After having an open conversation about these assumptions, the interviewer will ask the participant to imagine if the person who came in the classroom was objectively unattractive. They will be asked their thoughts about that individual in a broad sense. They will then be asked what personality characteristics the

unattractive student would hold. There may not be any differences between responses, however, that is still vital data. We want to understand if these slight changes lead to different responses. The final question within this scenario-based question leads the participant to think about these two past individuals, the objectively attractive person, and the objectively unattractive person. We ask them to imagine that they are tasked with a group project in which they must work with another classmate. Everyone else has predetermined partners so they must choose between working with an attractive or unattractive individual. Once the participant has made their selection, we will ask them to explain. Some participants may be hesitant to select a partner purely off of their perceived attractiveness, however, we as a society are constantly tasked to work with others without knowing anything about them. This distinction may help us understand if attractive individuals receive preferential treatment or are simply favored in general.

The final series of questions address certain aspects of enhancing physical attractiveness. The seventh and eighth questions ask the interviewer to discuss their opinions on people who use beauty enhancing techniques. Some methods that are specified are make-up, hair dye, hair extensions, and regular gym attendance. These questions are asked to establish the participants' feelings around efforts to enhance physical attraction. Some may think that these methods are a form of compensation for those who they deem unattractive. Others may not think anything of these adaptations other than the fact that the person utilizing them wishes to be perceived differently. The researcher will then ask the interviewee what they do to make themselves feel attractive. They will also ask what their reasons are for doing these things. Participants may not think that beauty enhancing methods are an accurate portrayal of one's attractiveness, but

they may partake in these activities themselves. The final question asks the participant to share any other thoughts, feelings, or personal experiences that they were not able to say before. They are then thanked for their time and information that they provided. This measure was created to facilitate a conversation about assumptions around attraction and personality characteristics. The results of this study will not be causal or generalizable. However, we are not claiming them to be. We hope that the results of this study will show us patterns to pursue.

### **Procedure**

Once a participant responds to the call for participants, they will receive informed consent digitally. After setting up a meeting time with the researchers they sign the informed consent document and fill out the demographic questionnaire in person. Once completed the participant will be asked a series of ten open-ended questions. This part of the study will likely last 30-45 minutes per participant. Once completed, the participant will be thanked for their participation and reminded that they may receive an email if they are selected for the member checking portion of the study.

Finally, at the conclusion of all interviews, member checking will occur for 30% of participants. If participants are selected for this portion of the study, they will receive an e-mail to set up a time to discuss their interview virtually. We will discuss various parts of their interview and common themes that arose. Member checking will occur as soon as data from the interview transcriptions has been processed and is coded. The members will be sent any portion that I feel is pertinent to what they expressed in their interview and asked to provide feedback on whether this aligns with their sentiments. This will only last approximately 5-15 minutes and will conclude their participation in

this study. Participants will be considered enrolled in the study from the time of their first interview to when they either chose to withdraw from the study, or when the senior thesis course for honors is concluded in the fall and all member checking has been completed. This amounts to 4 total points of contact with a total commitment time from participants estimated at around 60 minutes.

### **Data Analytic Strategy**

The audio recordings will be transcribed and coded for themes and patterns. Participants will be referred to throughout the study by letter i.e., Participant A, Participant B and so on. Real names or any identifying information will be excluded from the study. These adaptations ensure that anonymity is maintained. Once completely transcribed into Microsoft Word the interviews will be coded using in-vivo and thematic coding. In-vivo coding is a line-by-line coding strategy in which spoken words develop the themes. It ensures that the spoken words are not lost in the coding process. The second coding strategy utilized is thematic coding. This type of coding strategy analyzes common patterns within the passages. These two methods, though time consuming, will allow the researchers to gather all important themes that arise across all transcripts. To maintain methodological rigor those who code the articles will also make notes along the bottom margins. This reflexivity allows them to acknowledge any biases or other thoughts that arise during the coding process. And finally, peer debriefing will occur. Members of an emotional regulation research lab will assist the researcher by coding the transcripts. This will be performed without prior knowledge of the researchers' codes to look for consensus. If agreement is not found from peer to peer, the codes and reflections will be reassessed.

After all transcripts are coded by the researcher and their peers the codes will be compiled into an Excel spreadsheet. Common themes will be described in great detail with direct quotes cited within. If the themes demonstrate a clear preference for partnering with the attractive individual the researcher's hypothesis will be confirmed. If the data shows that participants chose both the attractive individual and unattractive individual at the same rate the hypothesis will be refuted. Similarly, if a clear preference for the unattractive individual develops, the hypothesis will be refuted. The researcher also expects to see the participants attributing positive personality characteristics to the attractive individual and negative personality characteristics to the unattractive individual. These results would also confirm the hypothesis of the data gatherers. Alternative results would disconfirm the current hypothesis. The conclusions that are drawn from these themes will be used to pursue future research.

### **Limitations**

There are limitations to any study which provide room for future research to improve the past. Within this proposed study there are limitations regardless of the methodological rigor that will be ensured. The first disadvantage of this study lied within the sampling procedures. The snowball sampling utilized within this study could propose a lack of definite knowledge as to whether the sample is an accurate reading of the target population. This limitation suggests that the results will be less generalizable than if randomized sampling was used. The second disadvantage to the method of this study is the interviewing procedure. Even though these interviews will be one-on-one there is still a chance that a participant will try to respond in a socially acceptable manner. This type of response bias is typical within interviews with or without multiple participants. The



novelty of being in a study can be enough to impact the responses of the participants. The experimenters will be doing everything in their power to assure the participants that honest answers are the only pertinent responses needed. Faking good would not be beneficial in any way.

Another limitation in this study was the interview guide. It was created for the purpose of this study and therefore extensive testing was not possible. This means that there may be errors within the wording that could lead the participants to respond in one way or another. However, even though there may be gaps within this data gathering process the researchers recognize that these results will not be objective. Rather these results are interpretive and not generalizable, but we are not claiming it to be.

### **Future Research**

This study was created with future research in mind. The transcripts created from the interviews will provide codes that can be used as variables for future studies. There are other aspects that can be involved to deepen our understanding of these biases and perceptions. For instance, providing a visual component could allow participants to agree or disagree on what makes an individual attractive or unattractive. This way we may be able to identify the physical characteristics that people associate with personality qualities. Another aspect worth exploring is gender differences. These can be seen within the responses of participants towards the made-up scenarios that could also lead to new data. Men, women, and others beyond the binary may make different assumptions about one's personal characteristics based on their physical attractiveness. And finally, conducting a qualitative experiment could also prove beneficial once the themes are

gathered. The researchers could use future qualitative experiments to make claims about why and how these things occur.

If we find that positive personality traits are attributed to attractive individuals and unattractive individuals it may be worth exploring if these positive perceptions have been common historically. This can be conducted through meta-analyses that look at past data on first impressions of all individuals. If these results were found it would also mean that further research is needed to understand why people choose to be associated with one group or the other. The preferences for attractive individuals would still need to be addressed. However, if we find that negative personality traits are attributed to attractive individuals and unattractive individuals it may be worth exploring where these negative attributions stem from. It is likely that these associations are learned and could be projected because one's own feelings of themselves. Self-hatred for one's appearance can lead to preferences against those who look like them or other implicit biases. If we find that positive personality traits are attributed to attractive individuals and negative personality characteristics are attributed to unattractive individuals it may be worth exploring further studies that could confirm our hypothesis. This result confirms the theory that unattractive individuals are at a disadvantage, therefore further research to measure the directionality and extent of these results would be necessary. However, if we find that negative personality traits are attributed to attractive individuals and positive personality characteristics are attributed to unattractive individuals it may be worth exploring the roots of these impressions. If we find that the same personality traits are attributed equally to both attractive and unattractive individuals it may be worth exploring why these physical differences have no effect on this aspect of people.

If participants choose to partner with the attractive individual more it may be worth exploring stigma by association. It is possible that the participants chose to partner with the attractive individual in hopes that others see them interacting and therefore associate them both with beauty. Alternatively, if participants choose to partner with the unattractive individual more it may be worth exploring if this is due to the hopes that the participant will be viewed as more attractive in comparison. It could also be that these results have little to do with attraction. If this is the case, then it would be pertinent to study the reasoning behind these choices.

Future research can also address the limitations of the current study. Thorough testing on the interview guide script could be valuable to ensure that participant responses are valid. A measure can be created to see if participants can infer the purpose of the study simply through the wording of the script. If they can infer this information, it is possible that they could try to change their answers to line up with our desired results or reject our hypothesis. Randomized sampling could be used rather than snowball sampling to obtain a more accurate result. With randomized sampling it is possible that the participants would be more generalizable to the larger population. This future research could be used to deeper societies understanding of biases created through the physical attractiveness stereotype. These preferences can be harmful to those who do not explicitly benefit from them.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research would lead to a significant improvement over the original studies through the use of open-ended questions. The scenario situation also allows participants to confirm or refute their previous statements. The results will also

greatly benefit the field of social and personality psychology by helping us understand how our preferences may be able to create associations between beauty and personality traits. These findings would, in turn, also benefit the layperson by helping bring awareness to our unconscious biases that may occur when meeting new people. They may allow us to make connections that would not have otherwise been possible.

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## Beauty Stereotypes Among College Students Interview Guide Script

Thank you so much for participating in our focus group. My name is Sophia, and I would love to hear your thoughts and experiences regarding beauty stereotypes in college students. Before we begin, I do have some rules to share with you all. These guidelines have been put in place to facilitate our discussion. The discussion will last about an hour. At this time please silence all mobile devices.

Firstly, what is shared here today will not leave this room. We want everyone to feel comfortable to share any thoughts that pertain to this issue without the fear of judgment. Feel free to raise your hand or speak up whenever you would like to share.

There are no right or wrong answers, please express any thoughts, experiences, insights, or opinions you feel are relevant. I would like to hear any opinions you may hold even if you do not think we will agree.

Finally, the discussion will be recorded to ensure we are capturing as much information as possible. If you prefer to remain off the audio recording, please make me aware and we will take notes instead. No one will ever be identified by name in the session notes. These notes will be summarized when reporting my findings.

Are there any questions?

We will start by establishing an agreed upon definition of a physical attractiveness. Physical attractiveness is defined as the degree to which a person's physical features are considered aesthetically pleasing or beautiful in the dominant mainstream context.

Every one of us has preconceived notions and stereotypes of physical attractiveness but I would appreciate you being honest and open with us about these questions. So, with that understanding:

### **Questions:**

1. When you picture an objectively beautiful person what comes to mind?
2. How important is your own physical attractiveness, and why?
3. **I want you to think about physically attractive women (yourself?), once you have that picture in your mind what personality characteristics come to mind?**
  - a. **Imagine on the first day of classes you see a physically attractive woman in your class, what kind of personality characteristics would this person hold?**



- 4. What if that person was a man? What kind of personality characteristics would they hold?**
5. What if someone who was objectively unattractive came in the classroom, what would you think about that person?
  - i. What would be some of their personality characteristics?
6. If you were then tasked with a group project in which you would work alongside another student which individual would you choose?
  - a. Why did you choose one versus the other? Explain?
7. What do you think about individuals who use make-up, hair dye, and hair extensions?
8. What do you think about people who regularly attend the gym?
9. What do you do to make yourself feel attractive?
  - a. What are your reasons for doing so?
10. Is there anything you did get to share today that you would like to add?
  - a. If there is something you did not feel comfortable sharing today but would still like me to know, please feel free to stay after.
  - b. Thank you for your time and all the information you provided.

## Demographics Survey

Name (Printed): \_\_\_\_\_

Sex: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

Sexual Orientation: \_\_\_\_\_

Major: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



The College at  
**BROCKPORT**  
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

**Institutional Review Board**

**Form A—Statement of Informed Consent For Adult Participants**

**An Exploratory Analysis: Attractiveness and its Influence on Perceived Personality Characteristics**

**KEY INFORMATION:**

- You are being asked to be in a research study of the assumptions and perceptions pertaining to physical attractiveness utilized by college students. As with all research studies, participation is voluntary.
- The purpose of this study is to understand if perceived attractiveness is related to perceived personality characteristics. Some individuals may make incorrect assumptions about individuals based on their appearance alone. This exploration will be done through the analysis of themes gathered through one-on-one interviews with participants.
  - A maximum of 20 people will take part in this study. The results will be used for a senior honors thesis research paper and Scholar's Day presentation.
  - If you agree to take part in this study, you will be involved in this study for one interview lasting around 60 minutes. Following the conclusion of all interviews, member checking will occur. Some participants may receive an e-mail requesting a 5–15-minute phone call to discuss your interview and common themes. The total time you will be expected to spend in this study is around 75 minutes.
  - If you agree to participate in this study, you will be involved in one interview in which you will be asked a series of questions lasting about an hour. These will take place either at a location of your choosing (within COVID-19 guidelines for social distancing) or online via zoom, Microsoft teams, skype, or phone call. These questions are designed to inquire about your current assumptions and perceptions around beauty and physical attractiveness stereotypes. Should you become uncomfortable or distressed during the interview it can be stopped at any time and you have the right to cease participation at any point in this study.
  - There are no foreseeable risks within this study.
  - You may not directly benefit from this research; however we hope that your participation in this study may help individuals and researchers to confront their unconscious assumptions and perceptions of others. This research is intended to better understand why people may be more inclined to associate themselves with attractive individuals rather than unattractive individuals. It is our hope that this

qualitative research will lead to further studies on the impacts of perceived attractiveness and the associations that are attributed to it.

Click or tap here to enter text.

You are being asked to be in a research study of the assumptions and perceptions around the topic of attraction that occur when interacting with individuals. This study is being conducted at a location of your choosing or via online video chat services. This study is being conducted by: Sophia Garlock in the Department of Psychology at The College at Brockport.

You were selected as a possible participant because you responded to the flier or volunteered and are a current college student who is 18 years old or older.

Please read this consent form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be in the study.

### **PROCEDURES:**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

After a participant initially contacts me we will set up a meet time, date, and location for the in-person/online interview.

Second, we will meet for the interview on a date and time of your choosing. This interview will last around 60 minutes. An interview guide containing a short series of questions will be used, but the interview will be primarily lead by the interviewee. All interviews will be audio-recorded for the most accurate records unless the participant indicates otherwise. The audio recordings will be heard exclusively by the interviewer for the transcript purposes, and will be destroyed within IRB guidelines and regulations. A signature is needed at the bottom of this form to constn to this. If you do not, hand-written notes of the interview will be kept and destroyed within the IRB guidelines.

Finally, at the conclusion of all interviews for the study, member checking will occur for some participants. If you are selected for this portion of the study you will receive an e-mail to set up a time to discuss your interview virtually (online or over the phone). We will discuss various parts of your interview and common themes that arose. This will only last approximately 5-15 minutes and will conclude your participation in this study.

### **COMPENSATION/INCENTIVES:**

You will not receive compensation.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY:**

The records of this study will be kept private and your confidentiality will be protected. In any sort of report the researcher(s) might publish, no identifying

information will be included. The only exception to maintaining confidentiality would be if you indicate that there is immediate and serious danger to the health or physical safety of yourself or others. In that case, a professional may have to be contacted. We would always talk to you about this first.

Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher(s) will have access to the records. All data will be kept within a password-locked laptop by the investigator(s). All study records, including approved IRB documents, tapes, transcripts, and consent forms, will be destroyed by shredding and/or deleting after 3 years. If audio-recordings are made, they will be erased as soon as they are transcribed.

### **VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:**

Participation in this study is voluntary and requires your informed consent. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with The College at Brockport. If you decide to participate, you are free to skip any question that is asked. You may also withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

### **CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS:**

The researchers(s) conducting this study: Sophia Garlock. If you have questions, **you are encouraged** to contact the researcher(s) at (585) 489-9168 or by e-mail at sgarl3@brockport.edu. The advisor for this study is Mary Tiede, Professor at The College at Brockport. Dr. Tiede can be reached at (585) 383-1364 or by e-mail at mtiede@brockport.edu.

If you would like to talk to someone other than the researchers, please contact The College at Brockport IRB compliance officer at (585) 395-2779 or IRB@brockport.edu.

### **STATEMENT OF CONSENT:**

I am 18 years of age or older. I have read and understood the above information. I consent to participate in the study.

I understand that I will be audiotaped. If I do not wish to be audiotaped, I will inform the researcher, who will instead hand-write or type notes.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*I agree to be audiotaped \_\_\_\_\_ If no, I understand that the researcher will take handwritten notes to record my responses.*

Signature of Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

***Please keep the second copy of this informed consent for your records.***

# **PARTICIPANTS NEEDED!**

**ARE YOU A STUDENT WHO IS  
18 YEARS OLD OR OLDER?  
WOULD YOU LIKE TO PARTICIPATE IN A  
PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY WITH  
INTERVIEWS?**

**CONTACT THE EMAIL BELOW FOR  
MORE INFORMATION.**

Study will involve a 45-minute interview in person or via video chat. Participation is entirely voluntary and may be revoked at any time.

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Researcher Name: Sophia Garlock