

# The Effect of Similar Physical Features on Perceived Levels of Attraction

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### **Abstract**

The repeated mere exposure hypothesis holds that individuals will view those who are genetically unrelated but have similar facial features as more attractive than those with dissimilar facial features. To investigate this hypothesis, the specific level of attraction that occurs between individuals when they possess similar physical characteristics was of interest. Fifty undergraduates were asked to rate how attractive they found a set of sixteen individual headshots. When these ratings were compared to the number of eye color and hair color similarities that existed between the pictured individuals and each participant; it was found that participants were more likely to find someone attractive if they possessed either the exact same or complete opposite characteristics as themselves.

How many times have you heard someone say “don’t they look good together” or “they make such a cute couple?” Have you ever wondered what causes someone to say; “they’re just not my type?” Statements such as these have begun to question the process of mate selection. Does a method behind mate selection truly exist, or is there simply no reasoning behind what we find to be physically attractive?

Over the last few decades, this question has become the focal point of many different studies. Everyone holds a unique perception as to what is attractive or unattractive. Dion (1973) found that children as young as three had the ability to exhibit stereotyping based on the facial attractiveness of their peers. That is to say that even preschoolers have the ability to distinguish what they find attractive and unattractive.

When evaluating the physical attractiveness of an individual, there are many different characteristics that one considers. Studies have looked at the effects of a variety of physical and non-physical stimuli on perceived physical attractiveness. These studies have investigated an array of stimuli that range from the relationship between male facial symmetry and their perceived skin condition, (Jones, Little, Feinberg, Penton-Voak, Tiddeman, & Perrett, 2004) to the correlation between the attractiveness of a women’s first name and her perceived physical attractiveness (Hassenbrauck, 1988).

There are several factors that one considers when looking for a

mate. According to Knox (1997), people tend to look for homogenous characteristics in their relationships such as values, education and age. Homogamy refers to an individual's attraction to things that are the same (Knox et al., 1997). Knox was interested in finding the degree to which college students preferred dating or marrying an individual who possessed similar characteristics as themselves. He found that while homogamy was important in choosing a dating partner, it was stressed as extremely important when choosing a spouse. Similarly, Sappenfield and Balogh (1970) found that a subject's perceived attractiveness towards another individual was highly correlated to the subject's perceived similarity to that individual.

There have been numerous studies showing that people are more attracted to individuals who possess a similar level of attractiveness as themselves (Mursein, 1972).

This idea is expressed within the stimulus-value-role theory of mate selection. Mursein (1972) supported this theory by asking engaged couples to rate the physical attractiveness of their partner and of themselves. Mursein then had a group of judges rate the attractiveness of each individual. Through this process, he found that people do indeed tend to choose a partner with a similar level of attractiveness as themselves. Similar results concerning homogamous levels of attractiveness among couples was also reported in studies performed by Curran and Lippold (1975), Cavior and Boblett (1972), and Chambers et al. (1983).

In this study, however, it is not the global levels of physical attractiveness among couples that I am interested in, but in the specific level of attraction that occurs between individuals when they possess similar physical characteristics.

A study conducted by Hinsz (1989) supported the repeated mere exposure hypothesis and investigated the theory that 'people tend to marry people who look like themselves.' This is the idea that repeated exposure to their own face as well as the faces of those direct family members who are genetically similar to themselves has a significant effect on an individual's attraction to faces that possess similar characteristics as their own.

In his study, Hinsz had a group of judges rate the facial resemblance between pictures they were given of engaged and married couples. Half of the pictures the subjects were given were pictures of

people with their actual partner while the other half were pictures of people randomly paired with another individual. He found that a significant effect existed between the actual couples, thus supporting the idea that facial resemblance among couples does occur. This holds that individuals will view those who are genetically unrelated but have similar facial features as themselves as more attractive. At this point, we should note that the pictures in Hinsz's study were of actual couples that had been together for a long period of time. Does the same effect hold for people who have never met?

In this experiment, I intend to investigate the repeated mere exposure hypothesis and its effects on perceived physical attractiveness. By having subjects rate the attractiveness of certain individuals and comparing those ratings with the number of similar physical facial features possessed by both the subject and the rated individual, I predict to find a positive correlation between the number of similar characteristics and perceived levels of attraction.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Fifty (26 male and 24 female) undergraduate students at Clemson University, ages 18 to 23, participated in this study. Of the fifty participants, forty-eight were Caucasian while one was American Indian and another was Hispanic. Participation in this study was voluntary. The participants were approached, given a brief description of the study and asked if they would like to participate in the experiment. They were told that this was a study on attraction being done for a class in experimental psychology.

### ***Materials***

In this study, a three-part questionnaire was used to test the effects of similar physical facial features on perceived levels of attraction. Part one included a set of sixteen pictures and a sixteen-question survey corresponding to those pictures. The pictures were colored headshots of models collected from various websites. Each picture was individually numbered and possessed varying combinations of the two traits the study was interested in, light and dark hair color and light and dark eye color. These two traits were chosen because they are the two most obvious distinguishing characteristics. They are usually listed on birth certificates, driver's licenses and most other forms of personal identification. Participants were then asked to rate how attractive they found the pictured person to be using a ten point Likert scale where 1 was not at all attractive and 10 was extremely attractive.

Part two consisted of a brief survey concerning demographic information and questions related to the participant's own physical facial features. The last part of the questionnaire was a sixteen-question survey that asked the participants to go back through the set of pictures they rated in part one, and answer two questions for each picture. These questions served as a manipulation check and asked the participants to determine which of the two traits of interest in this study the pictured person possessed. They were asked if they considered the pictured person's hair color and eye color to be light or dark.

### ***Procedure***

Participants were randomly approached at various places throughout Clemson University's campus. Once a participant agreed to participate in the study, they were handed a questionnaire and asked to return it when complete. Most participants were able to complete the questionnaire in less than ten minutes. Once the questionnaire was returned, they were given a brief explanation of the study. Participants were told that this was a study looking at the effect of similar physical features on perceived attraction. They were then provided with information for a further, more detailed analysis of the experiment and results if necessary.

### **Results**

To test the relationship between similar physical facial features and attraction, a 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 ANOVA was performed on the data with a between subject variable of participant gender and three within subject variables of gender match, hair color match and eye color match. Means and standard deviations for each condition are presented in Table 1.

There was no significant main effect of participant gender ( $F(1, 47) = 0.52, p = 0.48$ ), however, a significant main effect was found for gender of the pictures ( $F(1, 47) = 38.05, p < 0.001$ ). These results showed that although the gender of the participant did not have a significant effect on how attractive the participants rated the pictures, the gender of the pictures did have a significant effect on how attractive the participants rated each picture.

Furthermore, a significant interaction was found between gender of the pictures and participant gender, ( $F(1, 47) = 61.31, p < 0.001$ ). That is to say, male participants rated the male pictures as less attractive than the female pictures. Females on the other hand, also rated the male pictures as less attractive than the female pictures. Thus, as shown in Figure 1, regardless of whether gender matched or was different; both

genders rated the female pictures as more attractive than the male pictures.

A significant interaction was also found between hair color and eye color, ( $F(1, 47) = 6.65, p = 0.013$ ). This holds that the picture's hair color and eye color influenced how attractive a participant rated that particular picture. Additionally, as displayed in Figure 2, the results showed that participants rated the pictures as more attractive if they reported having similar hair color and eye color as the picture or if they reported having different hair color and eye color as the picture. Furthermore, participants found the pictures to be less attractive if only a hair color or eye color match was reported.

These findings, in part support our hypothesis. Although participants found the pictures to be more attractive when both a hair color and eye color match existed; contrary to our predictions, the same effect was found when hair color and eye color did not match. In light of our hypothesis, one would expect the condition in which both variables did not match to have the lowest level of attraction; this however was not the case.

In addition to the ANOVAs, paired sample *t* tests were run between varying hair and eye match combinations. Both the double match and the double difference conditions were significantly greater than the hair match/eye difference condition, ( $t(48) = 2.21, p = 0.03$  and  $t(48) = 2.26, p = 0.03$ , respectively). Likewise, both the double match and the double difference conditions were marginally greater than the hair different/eye match condition, ( $t(48) = 1.63, p = 0.11$  and  $t(48) = 1.67, p = 0.10$ , respectively). Contrary to our prediction, however, the double difference condition was virtually identical to the double match condition, ( $t(48) = 0.03, p = 0.98$ ).

There were no other significant main effects or interactions.

## **Discussion**

The results of this study illustrated that participants rated the pictures as more attractive if they reported having the same hair color and eye color as the picture or if they reported having different hair color and eye color as the picture. Moreover, participants found the pictures to be less attractive if only a hair color or only an eye color match was reported. These results suggest that people are more likely to find someone attractive if they possess either the exact same or complete opposite characteristics as themselves. These findings, in part, support the results of Hinsz's (1989) study and the repeated mere exposure hypothesis. They illustrate that perceived physical attraction is indeed influenced by an

individuals personal physical features.

Although participants found the pictures to be more attractive when both a hair color and eye color match existed, contrary to our hypothesis, the same effect was found when hair color and eye color did not match. There are, however, several extraneous confounds that one must consider when analyzing these results. To begin with, this study limited itself to looking at the effects of hair color and eye color alone. There are, nonetheless, numerous other physical variables that effect perceived levels of attraction. The pictures used in this study were chosen on the basis of their varying hair and eye color combinations as well as their consistent level of attractiveness. It was beyond the scope of this study, however, to hold all other physical variables consistent. As a result, it is hard to credit the attraction ratings solely to possessed hair color and eye color combinations.

Furthermore, one must consider the fact that of the sixteen pictures chosen for this experiment; each variable combination (i.e. light haired, dark eyed male or dark haired, light eyed female) was represented by only two pictures. Regardless of the attempt to hold the level of attraction among the participants constant, there were certain pictures that, on the whole, were unanimously found to be more attractive and less attractive than the others. Two pictures of each variable combination were included to try and offset the chance of a particular combination being over or under represented because of this; however, there is still the chance that our data was misrepresented on this basis.

Again, the results of this study did, in part, support our hypothesis and the idea of the repeated mere exposure hypothesis. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that the participants were just as likely to find the pictures with complete opposite characteristics equally as attractive as the pictures in which a complete characteristic match was reported. This tendency, however, is the exact opposite of the ideals consistent with the repeated mere exposure hypothesis. Upon further consideration, it is possible that this trend was reported as a result of conditioning inconsistent with that associated with the repeated mere exposure hypothesis in which the repeated exposure to one's own face produces the foundation for what one finds attractive. Just as this exposure can set the standards for what one considers attractive, it can also produce the opposite effect. If a person considers him or herself attractive or thinks highly of them self, it is likely that they may think more highly of those similar to themselves. Likewise, if a person is unhappy with the way they look and longs to change their physical appearance, it is quite possible that

they may be drawn to those who possess the characteristics they wish they themselves possessed. It is possible that this was responsible for the trend that was found in this study, however, further research is needed to test this hypothesis.

In conclusion, the results of this study did show support for the idea that perceived physical attraction is indeed influenced by individual's personal physical features. The participants rated the pictures as more attractive if they reported having the same hair color and eye color as the picture or if they reported having different hair color and eye color as the picture. Moreover, participants found the pictures to be less attractive if only a hair color or only an eye color match was reported. It is important to note, however, that only two variables were looked at in this study and a small sample size was run. Further research is needed to determine if these results are accurate or simply a result of a limited sample size. Additionally future research should look at not only hair color and eye color, but other physical features that may influence attraction as well.

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