

More Than Just a Pretty Face? The Relative Importance of Physical Attractiveness in Initial Attraction and Dating Online

Lindsay Shaw Taylor¹, Andrew T. Fiore², Gerald A. Mendelsohn¹, Coye Cheshire²

University of California, Berkeley, ¹Department of Psychology, ²School of Information

INTRODUCTION

Decades of research highlights the central role that physical attractiveness plays in initial romantic attraction. Individuals make quick judgments about another's mate potential based on his or her appearance (Murstein, 1970); and even after getting to know one another better, physical appearance can be a primary determinant of romantic interest in a potential partner (e.g., Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, and Rotman, 1966).

The popularity of online dating provides an interesting opportunity to test the importance of physical attractiveness anew. On the one hand, just as in traditional dating, physical appearance among the first pieces of information online daters get about potential partners, as photographs are featured prominently in online dating profiles and searches. On the other hand, online dating makes it easy to search for partners based on their characteristics and interests, and it is easier to learn about partners' attributes quickly by reading their profiles.

We hypothesized that, just as in traditional dating, physical appearance would be important for *attraction*, but other characteristics would be more important for actual partner *selection*. Likewise, other characteristics would be as important or more important than physical appearance in predicting whether couples continue to date after the first meeting.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Lab Studies 1 & 2 show that physical attractiveness is a primary determinant of initial attraction online. This is consistent with classic social psychological studies demonstrating the primacy of physical attractiveness in initial romantic attraction.

- However, the data from Lab Study 2 and Online Dating Study 1 suggest that the importance of physical attractiveness quickly wanes. As soon as daters start to think about the people in the profiles as potential partners, factors such as likability, personality, and overall attraction are better predictors of romantic interest.

- Moreover, once partners meet face-to-face, physical attraction is the least important predictor of romantic interest, according to Online Study 2. Similarly, being pleasantly surprised (vs. disappointed) with a date's physical appearance after meeting face-to-face is unrelated to relationship success, whereas when Ps' opinions of their partners' personalities, how much they have in common, etc., decline, relationships end.

Acknowledgements

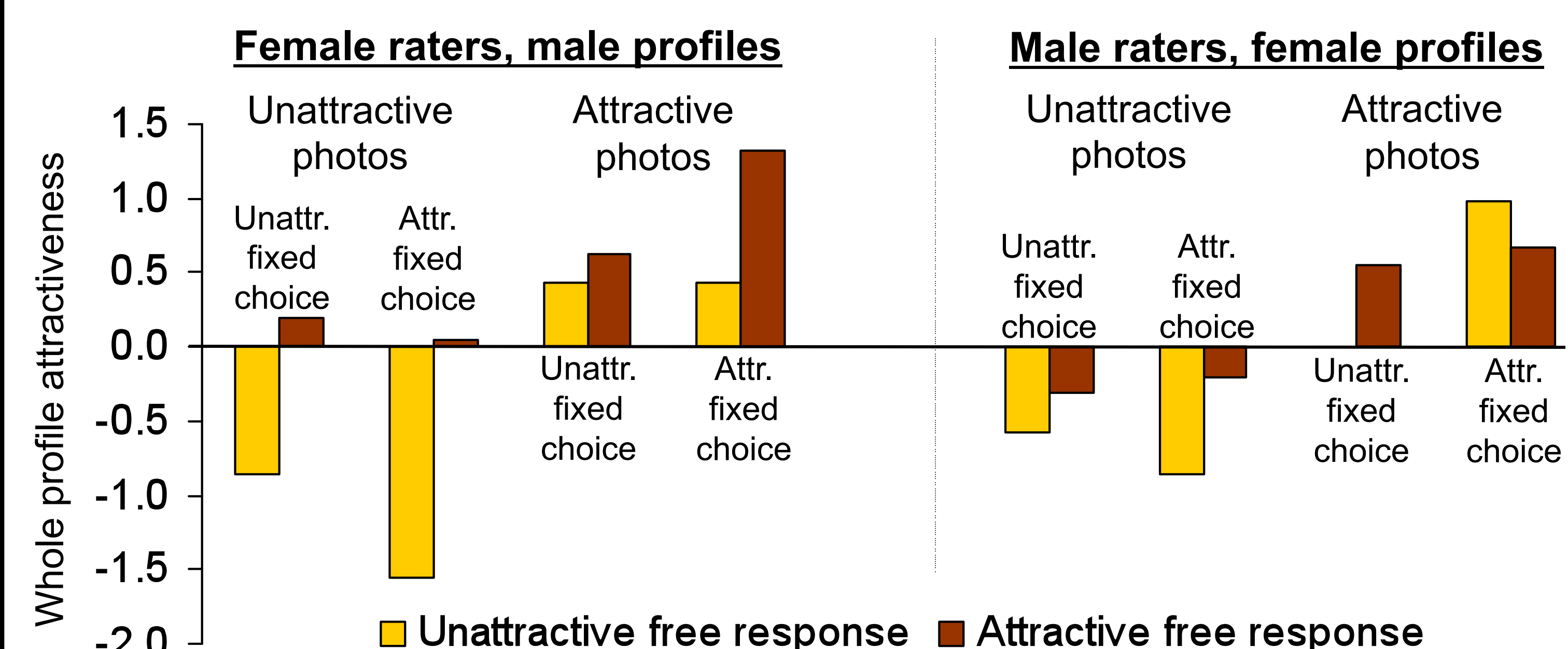
This research was supported in part by the National Science Foundation, HSD-IIS 0624356.

Lab Study 1: What makes an online dating profile attractive?

Participants were 41 female and 23 male heterosexual UCB undergraduates, age 19-25 ($M = 21$), predominantly Asian/Asian American (66%) and White (20%).

Method: We randomly selected 50 online dating profiles from a major US online dating site, belonging to men and women between 20 and 30 years of age. We broke the profiles down into their photo, free response self-description, and fixed choice self-description components. Participants viewed the whole profiles and components of opposite-sex profiles in random order and rated the attractiveness of each.

Analyses: Multiple regressions predicting the attractiveness of the whole profile from the attractiveness of its three components (photo, free response, & fixed choice self-description).



An attractive photo was necessary for a profile to be seen as attractive. For women, an attractive photo was also sufficient – all profiles with attractive photos were seen as attractive overall. For men, at least one other component needed to be attractive for the whole profile to be attractive.

Lab Study 2: Physical attractiveness and romantic interest

Participants were 117 female and 65 male heterosexual UCB undergraduates. Sample $M_{age} = 20.2$ years, mostly Asian/Asian American (51%) and White (29%).

Method: We pre-tested photos and free response self-descriptions from online dating profiles and selected low-, medium-, and high-attractive components. These were combined to create 9 profiles. Participants rated all 9 (within-subjects) on a variety of dimensions associated with interpersonal attraction (see table).

Analyses: 3 (photo attractiveness: low, medium, high) vs. 3 (text attractiveness: low, medium, high) x gender repeated measures ANOVAs.

Table shows F-ratios	Attractive	High self-esteem	Likable	Warm/ kind	Genuine/ trustworthy	P would contact target	P would respond to target
Main effect: PHOTO	363.03	100.82	39.52	16.39	8.05	144.15	19.24
Main effect: TEXT	13.67	27.13	54.45	69.46	65.69	34.34	32.01

Photo is clearly the stronger predictor of initial judgments of attractiveness and Ps' decisions to contact the people in the profiles. However, participants' used text to judge the likability of the targets and whether they would respond if the targets contacted them.

Online Dating Study 1: Positive expectations of a face-to-face date

Participants were 48 female and 38 male heterosexual users of a major U.S. online dating site. $M_{age} = 44.1$ years, predominantly White (77%).

Method: Participants who had met a partner through the site whom they were intending to meet face-to-face rated the partners on dimensions related to attraction. They also rated their positive expectations for the face-to-face date.

Analyses: Multiple regressions with ratings of partner as predictors and positive expectations of date/partner as outcome variables.

Table shows standardized regression coefficients	Excited to meet	Will want to see again	Interest in casual dating	Interest in serious relationship
Partner has desirable personality traits	.21 +	.27 *	.06	-.10
Overall, I am attracted to partner	.62 ***	.56 ***	.04	.47 **
We have a lot in common	-.02	.05	.07	.09
Partner is close to my ideal	.07	.08	-.06	.28 *
Partner's personality appeals to me	.09	-.06	.28+	.11
Partner's appearance appeals to me	.02	.05	.40 *	-.03

Partners' physical attractiveness was only important for interest in casual dating. Participants' interest in more serious relationships and their enthusiasm about their partners was predicted by other factors.

Online Dating Study 2: Longer-term relationship success

Participants were 150 (78 female, 68 male, 4 unreported) active users of a major U.S. online dating site. All had gone on a face-to-face date with someone they met on the site. Sample $M_{age} = 44.8$, predominantly White (82%).

Method: Participants retrospectively about the most recent person they had met through the site. They completed a series of items about how they viewed their partners before meeting face-to-face and again regarding their feelings about their partner immediately after the first f-t-f date.

Corr. btw partner ratings and # of dates after first mtg.	Overall attraction to partner	How much in common w/ partner	Partner is close to ideal	Got to know partner	Partner's personality is appealing	Partner's appearance is appealing
	0.45***	0.54***	0.52***	0.64***	0.44***	0.27***
Z-tests for sig diffs btw r and r_appearance	1.79†	2.74**	2.51*	4.02***	1.61	

The appeal of partners' physical appearance was the least important predictor of how long the relationships lasted.

Independent samples t-tests comparing people who were or were not still dating their partners ($n_s = 17$ and 124). Table shows mean change scores (post-date minus pre-date ratings).

	Ongoing relationships	Terminated relationships	t
Overall, I am attracted to partner	.53 (.80)	-.14 (1.70)	2.73*
We have a lot in common	.65 (1.22)	-.27 (1.50)	2.40*
Partner is close to my ideal	.71 (1.26)	-.27 (1.53)	2.53*
I got to know my partner well	1.06 (.97)	.39 (2.06)	2.24*
Partner's personality is appealing	.29 (.47)	-.12 (1.39)	2.46*
Partner's appearance is appealing	.47 (1.06)	-.18 (1.46)	1.66

In successful couples, Ps saw partners more positively after meeting face-to-face on all dimensions except physical appearance.

Positive means = more positive impressions of one's partner after meeting face-to-face.