

Attractiveness Norm Violations and the Halo Effect

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Abstract

This study investigated participants' expectations that people who are low versus high in attractiveness would violate social norms. Specifically, we tested the hypothesis that unattractive individuals would be rated as more likely to violate norms involving negative behavior than attractive individuals, and attractive individuals rated more likely to violate norms involving positive behaviors than unattractive individuals. To test these hypotheses, participants completed an online survey rating the likelihood that an individual depicted in a photograph would engage in norm-violating behavior. The photograph depicted either an attractive or unattractive individual. Three types of norm-relevant behaviors were described: positive, negative, and norm-conforming. The results suggest that (a) unattractive individuals were viewed as more likely to commit negative norm-violating behaviors than attractive individuals, (b) attractive individuals were viewed as more likely to commit positive norm-violating behaviors than unattractive individuals, and (c) attractive individuals were viewed as more likely to uphold norms than unattractive individuals.

Key Words:

Halo effect, norm deviation, social norm violation, attractiveness evaluation

An individual may be judged positively or negatively simply because of his or her level of attractiveness. This is called the *halo effect* (Coren, 1988). The halo effect occurs when an observer assumes that an attractive person is more likely to perform good behaviors than bad behaviors. This effect also works in the opposite manner – individuals who behave inappropriately are viewed as less attractive than individuals who behave appropriately. Overall, an individual may be viewed as good or bad simply because of his or her level of attractiveness (Malouff, Emmerton, & Schutte, 2013). Such perceptions can influence opportunities

and expectancy of success for these individuals in everyday tasks.

The Halo Effect

This phenomenon, in which the attractiveness of an individual influences an observer's expectations for that individual, is called the halo effect (Han et al., 2018). The halo effect has been found to influence a broad range of expectancies, including that when diagnosing more than one behavioral disorder the halo effect must be taken into account (Hartung et al., 2010), impulsive behaviors and hyperactivity leads to negative halo effect expectations (Álvarez-García, García, & González-Castro, 2014),

and the positive aspects are stronger than the negative of the halo effect when making behavioral assessments (Gräf & Unkelbach, 2016). Research also suggests that the halo effect influences judgements more in the realm of positive lights than the negative (Gräf & Unkelbach, 2016). The overall judgements made based on the halo effect are more influential when positive and by one opinion whereas the judgement for both negative and positive is less influential because the assessment is of a broader sample of behaviors.

Judgments based on appearances can occur quickly (Mount & Thompson, 1987). Some scenarios may require an individual to assess whether a stranger is safe to approach. For example, if a neighborhood is known for criminal activity or if someone is doing something that looks suspicious, it is necessary to make quick and critical decisions that it is not safe to approach that individual (Babad, Peer, & Benayoun, 2012; Gräf & Unkelbach, 2016). These quick judgements may also be advantageous in interview scenarios. The initial impression and appearance of an individual can demonstrate the type of personal care and commitment they put forth. However, solely relying on appearances can lead to hasty and inaccurate judgements. As a consequence, a less attractive applicant for a job may not be hired because he or she is viewed as possessing fewer desirable characteristics (Talamas et al., 2016).

Social Norms

A *norm* is a behavior or action that is prescribed situationally and varies based on culture (Levine et al., 2000). Norms determine what is acceptable and unacceptable in conducting one's public demeanor. A *norm violation* occurs when an individual performs an action that falls outside the lines of these predicted behaviors. Norm violation severity is determined by the culture in which one lives. Some cultures view norm violations to be severe no matter the type, whereas others are more relaxed in their behavior expectations (Babad, 2005). Cultures that tend to regulate social norms more strictly are those that experience severe circumstances such as poverty, natural disasters, and the like (Mu,

Kitayama, Han, & Gelfand, 2015). *Social norms* are enforced by other individuals in the situation (Silva & Fugas, 2016).

Schneider (2002) demonstrated that observing a person violate social norms can cause discomfort and anxiety. This discomfort and anxiety can cause the individual to report that he or she is less likely to engage in those non-normative behaviors in the future. However, being attractive allows an individual to violate social norms with fewer potential consequences compared to social norm violations by unattractive individuals. One may use his or her high attractiveness as a buffer against the consequences of violating norms because those norms violations may be perceived as exceptions rather than typical behavior from such an individual (Talamas et al., 2016). Likewise, a person of low attractiveness may choose to violate a norm simply because there are few consequences for doing so, largely because observers preemptively expect such behavior from unattractive individuals (Malouff et al., 2013).

The type and severity of a norm violation is variant due to the surrounding circumstances and necessity of the behavior. Social norm deviations can be as small as buying a beverage for someone else or as severe as committing a violation of the law. Deviation from the norm can be either positive or negative behaviors. The larger the deviation from the norm, the stronger the individual is disliked (Fritsche, Kessler, Mummendey, & Neumann, 2009). The degree to which a person is liked decreases with both the number of norm deviations he or she commits as well as the intensity to which the act(s) violate the norm. A single minor deviation from the norm can create an interest in the pattern of behavior whereas a single severe norm violation may lead to immediate disapproval of an individual.

The Halo Effect and Norm Violations

Attractiveness of an individual influences the perception that an observer has about the expected occurrence of social norm violations (Gräf & Unkelbach, 2016). The severity of these deviations is not always predicted during the initial judgement

and can become more severe towards the unattractive individual over time (Zebrowitz & Franklin, 2014). The punishment is also harsher towards these unattractive individuals because the expected behavior for them is deviating from the norms in a negative direction (Wade, & DiMaria, 2003). The attractive individual is expected to behave in predictable ways and to exhibit normative behavior (Thyne, Robertson, Thomas, & Ingram, 2016). Any violation from the norm, whether good or bad, creates a disliking of that individual because of the unpredictableness (Gibson et al., 2016). There is also a tendency to fulfill a bias that one knows is expected from him or her. The unattractive individual is aware of the bias that they will not follow the norms, therefore they will indeed break the norm thinking that is now their role. The same applies with the attractive individual (Harrod, 1980). When determining a judgment about another individual, it is quite common to fall back on the initial halo judgement (Bucklow, 1960).

Research on the halo effect has found a strong relationship between a high attractiveness rating of an individual and positive evaluations of that individual (Kaplan, 1974). However, other research suggests that an individual may use others' perception of him or her as a guide to how they behave (Bucklow, 1960). For example, an individual may be likely to deviate from the norm because their attractiveness, or lack thereof, as already determined by how they are perceived (Coren, 1988). Research suggests that a person may intentionally confirm the bias against him or her (Voncken & Dijk, 2013). For example, an unattractive person may violate social norms simply because he or she believes that is what others are expecting, thus confirming that the negative expectations of others carry no social risk (Talamas, Mavor, & Perrett, 2016).

The Present Research

We hypothesize that (a) unattractive individuals would be perceived as more likely to commit norm violations involving negative behavior than would attractive individuals, and (b) that attractive individuals would be perceived as more likely to commit norm violations involving positive

behaviors than unattractive individuals. We also hypothesized that attractive individuals would be perceived as more likely to uphold a common norm compared to unattractive individuals. To test these hypotheses, participants completed an online survey in which they rated the likelihood that an individual depicted in a photograph would engage in norm-violating or norm-supporting behavior. The photograph depicted either an attractive or unattractive individual. Three types of norm-relevant behaviors were described attributed to the pictured individual: violate a norm using positive behaviors, violate a norm using negative behaviors, and norm conforming.

Methods

The study was conducted through an online forum and received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to any data being collected. There was also an informed consent presented to, and signed by, participants before participation in the study. Participants were informed that they were not obligated to complete the study and that there would be no penalties implemented if the participant decided to cease participation at any point.

Materials

The survey used in the present study consisted of twenty-six scenarios, split in half for both the attractive and unattractive conditions, in which participants rated the likelihood that an individual would complete a specific action. The images presented before both sets of questions were randomized by gender for both the attractive and unattractive conditions. The scenarios consisted of neutral actions, positive norm violations, and negative norm violations, as described below.

Participants

One hundred and seventy-eight participants from a medium-sized university in the Southwestern United States completed the survey. An additional thirty-seven participants began the survey but were excluded for failing to complete the procedure. The ages of participants ranged from 18 to 84 (the most

frequently reported age group was 18 to 24 years old). Of these participants, 133 were female and 45 were male. The categories of race included in this study were White (N=113), Black or African American (N=17), American Indian or Alaska Native (N=1), Asian (N=9), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (N=1), Hispanic or Latino (N=28), and Other (N=9).

Procedure

A survey was posted on social media (i.e., Facebook and Instagram) for roughly one month and on a psychology database that posts surveys for students attending the authors’ home university for approximately three months. Participants viewed two images: one of an attractive person and one of an unattractive person (See Figure 1 for examples). The images were randomized per gender in each category of attractiveness. Following each image, participants were asked to rate the likelihood that the person in the picture committed several norm violations. Examples of norm violations included acts of kindness, criminal activity, and the like.

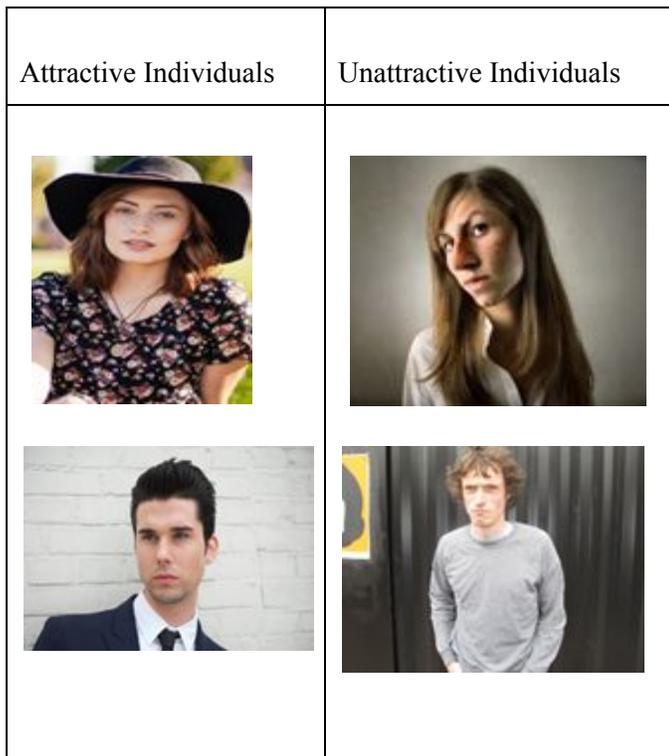


Figure 1: Attractive and unattractive images used in the study.

A set of fourteen scenarios in which a norm was violated in a negative manner were included in the survey. These norm violations included behaviors such as, “an individual was spotted leaving a restaurant without paying the check,” and “an individual just went and sat down at a table full of strangers. They did not say anything, just stared at them for five minutes then left.” A set of twelve scenarios in which a norm was violated in a positive manner were also included. These include behaviors such as, “an individual went around and started giving compliments to everyone around them,” and “an individual helped tutor a classmate who had missed class because of being sick.” Lastly, a set of nine scenarios in which the individual met (i.e., did not violate) a social norm in a common situation were also included. Examples of these include “an individual was spotted buying a birthday present for a friend,” and “an individual was spotted spending the weekend running errands and preparing for the week ahead.” Participants used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Definitely not likely; 5 = Definitely likely) to rate the extent to which they believe the person in the picture would engage in each behavior.

Results

Ratings for the fourteen negative scenarios were averaged to form an index. This same process was used with the twelve positive scenarios, and with the nine neutral scenarios. The results of a paired-samples t-test indicate that participants reported that an unattractive individual was more likely ($M = 2.72, SD = .80$) than an attractive individual ($M = 2.31, SD = .79$) to violate a norm using negative behaviors, $t(180) = 5.74, p < .001$.

Likewise, participants reported that attractive individuals were more likely to violate a norm using positive behaviors ($M = 3.02, SD = .87$) than unattractive individuals ($M = 2.56, SD = .71$), $t(180) = 6.05, p < .001$. Lastly, participants reported that attractive individuals were more likely to engage in the normative behavior (i.e., to not violate a common norm) in common scenarios ($M = 3.29, SD = .79$) than unattractive individuals ($M = 2.78, SD = .86$), $t(176) = 6.32, p < .001$. There were no

statistically significant gender differences in ratings for any norm violations (all $t_s < 1.72$, $p_s > .08$).

Discussion

We hypothesized that (a) unattractive individuals would be perceived as more likely to commit norm violations involving negative behavior than would attractive individuals, and (b) that attractive individuals would be perceived as more likely to commit norm violations involving positive behaviors than unattractive individuals. We also hypothesized that attractive individuals would be perceived as more likely to uphold a common norm compared to unattractive individuals. All three hypotheses were supported. Taken together, this pattern of results suggests that attractiveness influences perceptions that norm-violating, or norm-supporting, behavior will occur. It also influences whether positive or negative norm-violating behaviors are expected.

Limitations. There were several limitations in the current study. First, the study was conducted in an online format. It is possible that participants' judgments or reporting of their perceptions were influenced by this method. For example, a picture of an individual likely has less of an impact on perceptions of attractiveness than would seeing the individual in person (Shiban et al., 2015). Second, participant attrition reduced the viable sample size. Specifically, thirty-seven participants began, but did not complete the survey. It is possible that the results would have differed if all participants had completed the survey. Third, this study could have been improved by the order in which the images were presented. Concurrently seeing an attractive person and then an unattractive individual may bias the norm violation ratings of the unattractive person. The standard has been set by the attractive individual, thus creating a bias during the second norm violation analysis in a negative orientation (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011). Additionally, providing an average attractiveness level may have provided some balance to not create extreme rankings in norm violation likelihood. Finally, our sample of images for use in the study was limited.

Future directions. Further research using a broader array of attractive and unattractive individuals (and norm-violating behaviors) would be necessary to determine the generalizability of the results reported here. Future research varying the degree of attractiveness and unattractiveness of the target would help identify the limits of the halo effect. Finally, characteristics of the observer (e.g., one's own attractiveness, sexual interest, and the like) seem likely moderators of the relationship and could be fruitfully explored with additional research.

Conclusion

This study is one that takes previous research in the areas of social norm violations, attractiveness, and the Halo Effect to create an overlap that has yet to be explored in other research studies. This study produced results showing a higher likelihood of attractive individuals receiving the benefit of the doubt when it comes to behavioral judgements. The study also demonstrated a bias towards unattractive individuals to commit more negative social norm violations. Accordingly, new questions arise for the extent of such biases into areas such as gender and ethnicity. The practical significance and implications of this study could be beneficial to strategizing better hiring practices to avoid the interferences of these biases.

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