Social Perception and Interpersonal Influence: Some Consequences of the Physical Attractiveness Stereotype in a Personal Selling Setting

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Several effects of the physical attractiveness stereotype were assessed in a personal selling context. In a series of three experiments it was established that: (a) More favorable selling skills are attributed to physically attractive salespersons than to their unattractive counterparts; (b) in simulated sales scenarios, buyers treat ostensibly attractive sellers more cordially and are more likely to yield to their requests than is the case for unattractive sellers; and (c) in actual solicitations for a charitable organization, attractive persons induce a compliance rate significantly higher than that induced by unattractive solicitors. Results of the experiments, which are consistent with extant literature on physical attractiveness, are discussed in terms of commercially inspired interpersonal influence.

The proposition that good-looking people benefit socially from their physical attractiveness has been investigated for some 20 years, beginning with the classic article by Dion, Berscheid, and Walster (1972). Aronson (1972) elucidated what has come to be known as the *physical attractiveness stereotype*: “We like beautiful and handsome people better than homely people, and we attribute all kinds of good characteristics to them” (p. 216). In the years since, there have been numerous studies that one way or another test this what-is-beautiful-is-good phenomenon—Cash (1981), for example, lists about 500 articles in a bibliography—and the vast majority of them have supported its
prevalence. Several literature reviews (Berscheid & Walster, 1974; Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991; Joseph, 1982) as well as other works (e.g., Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986) have concluded that, overall, physically attractive people are liked more and are perceived in more favorable terms than their less attractive counterparts.¹

Eagly et al. (1991) have proposed implicit personality theory (Schneider, 1973) as a way to conceptualize the physical attractiveness stereotype. Briefly stated, the argument is that we hold impressions of attractive people that differ from those we hold for unattractive people and, in this sense, attractiveness implies a set of personality-like traits (e.g., popularity). The social cognitions that commonly accompany physical attractiveness, therefore, are due to inferences about attractive versus unattractive people’s personalities (e.g., Alicke, Smith, & Klotz, 1986; Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977). This construal is wholly consistent with tests of the physical attractiveness stereotype in consumer behavior settings (e.g., Baker & Churchill, 1977; Caballero, Lumpkin, Madden, 1989; Caballero & Pride, 1984; Caballero & Solomon, 1984; Debevec, Madden, & Kernan, 1986; Kahle & Homer, 1985; Kamins, 1990) where attractive spokespersons are almost always perceived in more favorable terms than their unattractive counterparts. However, the typical consumer behavior test of the physical attractiveness stereotype has been conducted in an advertising or advertising-like context, where there is no opportunity for interpersonal interaction between stimulus sellers (whose attractiveness can be manipulated) and subject buyers. Thus, any effects of the stereotype beyond perceptions—such as the consequences of differential social cognitions—have not really been assessed.

In sum, it is not clear that the physical attractiveness stereotype carries over to commercial forms of interpersonal influence. Apart from anecdotal evidence, for example, it has not been demonstrated that physically attractive salespersons perform better than their otherwise equivalent, but unattractive counterparts. If persuasion targets behave according to the physical attractiveness stereotype, they should perceive attractive salespersons more favorably, treat them more cordially, and respond (both verbally and behaviorally) to their requests more readily than they do to unattractive salespersons.

A series of three experiments was conducted to test these propositions. Experiment 1 elicited female and male subjects’ impressions (among traits

¹In spite of all this research, physical attractiveness remains an elusive construct. The majority of studies in the genre are laboratory-like experiments and they operationalize attractiveness by means of facial photographs, whose beauty values have been established previously by judges. (A notable exception comes from Alicke, Smith, & Klotz, 1986, who tested three attractiveness levels of faces and bodies in an orthogonal design.) Thus, most of what is known about physical beauty refers to comparative facial attractiveness. Moreover, it is questionable whether the pretty or handsome faces used as stimuli represent some aesthetic ideal or merely an average of the target population (see Langlois & Roggman, 1990).
associated with success) of female and male individuals alleged to be salespersons, who differed in physical attractiveness. Experiment 2 assigned subjects to the role of either buyer or seller in a simulated transaction, where the attractiveness of the seller was manipulated, and measured their treatment of one another in the dyad as well as buyers’ willingness to grant a product-demonstration appointment requested by sellers. Experiment 3, a field study, assessed subjects’ willingness actually to donate money to the American Heart Association as a function of the solicitor’s physical attractiveness.

EXPERIMENT 1

Even a cursory review of the classified ads for sales positions reveals that organizations consider “good appearance” an important selection criterion for applicants. If good appearance is approximated by physical attractiveness, the assumption implicit in this thinking is that attractive salespersons are more proficient than unattractive ones. To verify this assumption, however, it is necessary to demonstrate the existence of the attractiveness stereotype in personal selling. Experiment 1 therefore poses the question: Are physically attractive salespersons perceived more favorably than unattractive ones on traits presumably associated with selling effectiveness?

Method

Stimulus pretesting proceeded in two stages. First, yearbook photographs of 111 male and 111 female students were rated by two independent judges on a 7-point attractive-unattractive scale. Based on these ratings, 12 stimulus persons with the highest mean scores and 12 with the lowest mean scores were chosen. Second, 20 male and 20 female students rated each of these 24 photographs on a 7-point attractive-unattractive scale. Two photographs with the highest mean scores and 2 with the lowest mean scores were then selected for each sex of stimulus person (i.e., a total of 8 photographs) to represent the levels of attractiveness in the following experiment.

Subjects, who were assigned at random to treatment conditions, were 200 male and 164 female business or psychology undergraduates. A $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ between-subjects design manipulated attractiveness (attractive vs. unattractive stimulus person), sex of stimulus person, sex of perceiver, and product—either toiletries (a consumer good) or office equipment (an industrial good). The latter three independent variables were incorporated into the design to be

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2The two stimulus persons for each level of attractiveness and sex of stimulus person were randomized across subjects. Separate analyses, each based on one of the two stimulus persons for each level of attractiveness and sex of stimulus person, yielded highly congruent findings.
able to examine whether the expected attractiveness main effects on the dependent measures might need a qualified interpretation due to possible interactions among attractiveness, sex of stimulus person, sex of subject, and/or product. Each subject received a sheet of paper on which a reproduction of one of the photographs was mounted. The person in the photograph was described as a salesperson for one of the products. Subjects were instructed to record their impressions of the person on an impression formation questionnaire consisting of eighteen 7-point scales (see Table 1). The scales were selected from the personal selling literature to represent a broad spectrum of characteristics of successful salespersons (e.g., Canfield, 1961; Kirkpatrick, 1971). At the end of the questionnaire was a 7-point attractive–unattractive scale to permit a manipulation check and a good salesperson–bad salesperson scale for assessing the overall effect of the attractiveness manipulation. Subjects were debriefed after all of them had completed their participation.

Results

The four-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the attractiveness ratings produced only one significant effect: a main effect for attractiveness of stimulus persons, $F(1,348) = 17.38, p < .001$, with means of 2.24 and 5.32 for the

<table>
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<th>Varimax-Rotated Factor Loadings for Selling-Success Trait Scores</th>
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<td><strong>Selling-Success Trait</strong></td>
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<td>Considerate–inconsiderate</td>
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<td>Helpful–unhelpful</td>
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<td>.51</td>
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<td>.58</td>
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<td>Honest–dishonest</td>
<td>.75</td>
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<tr>
<td>Orderly–not orderly</td>
<td>.73</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attends to detail–ignores detail</td>
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<td>Sure–unsure</td>
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<td>Imaginative–unimaginative</td>
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<td>Resourceful–unresourceful</td>
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*Note.* Coefficients of congruence between Experiments 1 and 2 are .92 for Factor 1 (Social Skill) and .78 for Factor 2 (Personal Industry).
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attractive and unattractive levels, respectively. Thus, the attractiveness manipulation was effective.

So as not to capitalize on chance, a within-cells correlation matrix was computed for the 18 selling-success traits and this was factor-analyzed. Factors with eigenvalues greater than one were varimax-rotated. Two factors emerged, which we labeled Social Skill and Personal Industry, based on our interpretation of variables with loadings greater than .50. (See Table 1 for a comparison of factor loadings from Experiments 1 and 2.) The raw scores for each factor's traits were then summed to produce two dependent variables (Social Skill range = 10 to 70; Personal Industry range = 8 to 56). A four-way ANOVA was performed on both of these dependent variables and, in each case, the only significant effect (p < .05) was a main effect for attractiveness. Attractive stimulus persons were perceived more favorably than their unattractive counterparts on social skill (M_s = 26.83 vs. 34.50), F(1,348) = 4.59, p < .05, and personal industry (M_s = 25.98 vs. 37.71), F(1,348) = 11.99, p < .01.

An overall test of the effects of attractiveness was performed using the ratings for the good–bad salesperson scale. Again, attractive stimulus persons were perceived more favorably than unattractive ones (M_s = 2.92 vs. 4.40), F(1,348) = 9.34, p < .01, but further information is provided by the Attractiveness of Stimulus Person × Sex of Perceiver interaction, F(1,348) = 4.57, p < .05. Female perceivers viewed attractive stimuli more favorably than male perceivers (M_s = 2.77 vs. 3.08), but unattractive stimuli were viewed less favorably by female perceivers than by their male counterparts (M_s = 4.56 vs. 4.24). All other main or interaction effects on the good–bad salesperson ratings were insignificant.

Discussion

These results support the assumption that the physical attractiveness stereotype operates in personal selling settings. It appears that physically attractive people (male or female) are perceived more favorably on traits typically associated with selling effectiveness than are physically unattractive people. These attributions were generally unaffected by the sex of the perceiver (the interaction effect just presented is the only exception), and they were unaffected by the type of product (toiletries vs. office equipment) associated with the seller. This absence of a product effect contrasts with advertising applications of the physical attractiveness stereotype, for which a “match-up hypothesis” suggests that good-looking people can influence the sale of personal products more than ones having nothing to do with physical appearance (see, e.g., Baker & Churchill, 1977; Kamins, 1990). Moreover, our selling-success traits are reasonably consistent with the six attractiveness-discriminating traits enumerated in Eagly et al.'s (1991) meta-analysis—social competence, intellectual competence, interpersonal skill, honesty, self-esteem, and dominance.
Although Experiment 1 supports the existence of stereotypic perceptions, it says nothing about the consequences that might proceed from them. Accordingly, Experiment 2—inspired by the work of Snyder et al. (1977)—was designed to assess those consequences (as well as to confirm the reliability of the physical attractiveness stereotype). This experiment tested whether the physical attractiveness stereotype might guide a buyer's interaction with a seller such that, in turn, the seller's reciprocal behavior becomes nurtured and thus consistent with the buyer's initial attributions—in effect, whether the stereotype induces a self-fulfilling prophecy (Darley & Fazio, 1980).

Method

Fifty-six male business undergraduates (28 dyads whose members were unacquainted) were assigned at random to the role of either "buyer" or "seller" in a selling situation constructed to allow for the control of the information the buyer received about the seller's physical attractiveness. Subjects, who were enrolled in different classes, received extra course credit for their participation in the study. They were told that the study was being conducted to develop an experiential learning exercise in personal selling; they were unaware of the experiment's purpose. Subjects reported to separate experimental rooms (on different floors of a building), depending on their role assignment, to prevent pre-experimental identification and/or interaction.

Each buyer was given a written script, instructing him to assume the role of a new home purchaser. In a "Welcome-to-the-Neighborhood Kit" there was a letter from a smoke-detector manufacturer, which served to introduce the company's local sales representative. The letter included a photograph of the "salesman" (actually, one of the male stimulus photos from Experiment 1), ostensibly so that the buyer could form an impression of the person who—per the script—was expected to be telephoning soon. Before that call was initiated, however, each buyer assessed his selling partner on the impression formation questionnaire from Experiment 1 and indicated (as in Experiment 1) the attractiveness of the salesman depicted in the introductory letter.

The seller's role likewise was introduced with a written script, which instructed him to act as the local sales representative for a national manufacturer of smoke detectors. Realistic information about prices and the product line was provided, but the efficacy of in-home demonstrations was stressed. The seller was instructed to telephone the potential buyer to seek such a demonstration.

After the buyer completed his initial impressions, he was telephoned by the seller and engaged in a 4-min ad-lib conversation. After the sales call, each
buyer (seller) indicated on 6-point scales how likely he was to grant (obtain) the demonstration appointment, how likely he was to buy (sell) the product, how comfortable he felt during the conversation, and his estimate of how comfortable the seller (buyer) felt during the conversation. Sellers (only) also assessed on 6-point scales their buying partner’s attitude toward them, ranging from warm and friendly (1) to hostile (6), and the typicality of the buyer’s reaction to them, compared with the way people normally react to them ranging from very typical (1) to unusual and different (6).

The buyer–seller conversations were also tape-recorded separately at both the buyer’s and seller’s locations. The resulting buyers’ tapes were evaluated by four naive student judges. Four other naive student judges evaluated the resulting “sellers’ tapes.”

The judges evaluated the tape recordings of the sales interaction by completing six 6-point scales, adjusted to the role (buyer or seller) of the voice to which they had access:

1. The likelihood that a sales demonstration would be granted.
2. The likelihood of a sale.
3. The apparent comfort of the interacting parties.
4. The intimacy of their conversation.
5. How much they seemed to be enjoying themselves.
6. Their apparent attitudes toward one another.

These judges had no access to the attractiveness stimuli and were unaware of the experimental purposes. After participants had completed their assessments they were debriefed.

Results

Analysis of the buyer’s evaluations of the sellers’ attractiveness on a 6-point attractive–unattractive scale revealed a significant difference, $t(26) = 3.76, p < .001$, between the attractive ($M = 2.64$) and unattractive ($M = 4.14$) stimulus persons. The experimental manipulations thus proved effective.

Buyers’ initial impressions of their selling partners (the questionnaire data) were analyzed as in Experiment 1. The ratings were factor-analyzed and rotated. As shown in Table 1, the result was very similar to what was obtained in Experiment 1. Trait scores for the factors were summed to form dependent variables, one for each factor. These variables (Social Skill and Personal Industry, as in Experiment 1)—as well as the three traits that loaded on neither factor (see Table 1)—reveal that buyers who anticipated interacting with a physically attractive seller (compared with those who anticipated an unattractive one) expected him to have more social skill ($Ms = 23.93$ vs. $34.21$), $t(26) = 3.63, p < .001$; personal industry ($Ms = 9.5$ vs. $11.86$), $t(26) = 1.84, p <$
.05; tact (Ms = 2.28 vs. 3.21), t(26) = 2.11, p < .05; and enthusiasm (Ms = 2.21 vs. 3.21), t(26) = 2.17, p < .05, but not to be significantly more persuasive (Ms = 2.64 vs. 2.71), t(26) = 0.19, ns. Overall, these results are highly consistent with the stereotypic reactions observed in Experiment 1.

 Buyers’ stereotypic intuitions about their selling partners were reinforced by their postinteraction evaluations of them. Those in the attractive-seller condition were more likely than those in the unattractive-seller condition to grant the demonstration (Ms = 2.07 vs. 3.93), t(26) = 3.19, p < .05, and buy the product (Ms = 2.57 vs. 4.00), t(26) = 2.80, p < .05. Similarly, sellers in the attractive condition (who were unaware that their buying partners had access to a photograph, purportedly of them) estimated that they were more likely to obtain the demonstration appointment than did sellers in the unattractive condition (Ms = 2.07 vs. 3.07), t(26) = 1.51, p < .10.

 In addition, the “unattractive” sellers reported their buying partners as being less friendly (Ms = 3.21 vs. 1.93), t(26) = 3.55, p < .05, and more unusual in their reactions (Ms = 3.36 vs. 2.21), t(26) = 2.07, p < .05, compared with the reports of the “attractive” sellers. No significant differences between the experimental conditions were reported for comfort (self or partner).

 The naive judges’ evaluations of the buyer–seller interaction were measured by computing their mean responses for each of the dependent variables for each of the (buyer and seller) subjects. The four judges who listened to tapes of the buyers’ voices indicated that buyers in the attractive condition were more likely to grant the demonstration (Ms = 2.75 vs. 3.96), t(26) = 2.20, p < .05, and buy the product (Ms = 3.01 vs. 4.17), t(26) = 2.47, p < .05, than were those in the unattractive condition. Similar, but only marginally significant results were found for the corresponding evaluations of the tapes containing the sellers’ voices: For granting the demonstration, Ms = 3.00 vs. 3.73, t(26) = 1.43, p < .10; for buying the product, Ms = 3.21 vs. 3.80, t(26) = 1.38, p < .10. In general, then, there was agreement on these scales between actors’ self-assessments and those of observer-judges.

 In addition, buyers who interacted with “attractive” sellers were judged to be more comfortable (Ms = 3.00 vs. 3.68), t(26) = 1.97, p < .05; intimate (Ms = 3.14 vs. 3.79), t(26) = 2.88, p < .05; and friendly (Ms = 2.48 vs. 3.25), t(26) = 2.61, p < .05; and they seemed to enjoy themselves more (Ms = 3.27 vs. 3.89), t(26) = 2.26, p < .05, than did their counterparts in the “unattractive”-seller condition. Contrary to expectation, however, analysis of the tapes of the sellers’ voices yielded no significant differences between conditions on these variables—either the sellers did not reciprocate their buying partners’ behavior or the judges were not astute enough to discriminate between sellers’ behavior in the attractive and unattractive conditions.
Discussion

Overall, the results of Experiment 2 are highly consistent with those of Experiment 1; in each case, the physical attractiveness stereotype appears to have affected social perceptions and, in the case of Experiment 2, these perceptions seem to have influenced interpersonal behavior. This suggests, as Eagly et al. (1991) postulated, that a person’s physical attractiveness can convey hypothetical knowledge structures—correlated personality-like traits—that mediate other people’s initial impressions of him.3

But Experiment 2 suggests more. The postinteraction evaluations of the buyer subjects were in accordance with their initial impressions of sellers: Buyers in the attractive-salesman condition were significantly more likely to grant a demonstration appointment and buy the product. Interestingly, sellers in this condition (who were ignorant of the attractiveness manipulation) also estimated that they were more likely to obtain an appointment, and the overall interaction evaluations of the naive judges (who had access to voices only) were consistent with these self-ratings of the buyers and sellers. Furthermore, sellers in the unattractive condition judged buyers to be less friendly, a perception that was corroborated by the observer-judges. And these sellers perceived that their buyers reacted less typically and more unusually and differently from the way people ordinarily react to them. The interpersonal interaction appears to be very different, then, depending on whether the seller is regarded as physically attractive. Perceptions of attractiveness—and the social characteristics stereotypically associated with it—appear to induce buyers to behave more favorably toward attractive sellers.

That the salesmen-subjects seem not to have behaved differently between conditions requires some comment. First, we must depend on naive judges’ interpretations of dispositions and behavior, and realize that they used only salesmen’s voices to make evaluations. Second, a friendly buyer would probably prompt a seller to reciprocate, but an unfriendly one is unlikely to induce hostile behavior. A seller’s goal is a sale and he can be expected to persevere in spite of the buyer’s fractious manner.

Finally, we should emphasize that these findings focus on initial impressions. It is not unreasonable to expect that such attraction-based impressions might change over time with increased dyadic interaction. Eagly et al. (1991),

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3In addition to their other responses, buyers and sellers provided self-ratings of physical attractiveness. Sellers also indicated their self-perceptions on the impression formation questionnaire. Inasmuch as no significant differences between the attractive and unattractive manipulations were found for self-ratings of buyers’ and sellers’ attractiveness, actual attractiveness of buyers and sellers (as assessed by the experimenters), or self-ratings of sellers on the impression formation questionnaire, we have no reason to suspect that differences in attractiveness or explicitly assessed “personality” pose alternative explanations for these results.
for example, noted that individuating information about physically attractive people acts to attenuate stereotypic impressions of them. Also, it should be noted that the physical attractiveness of a salesperson—however significant an influence it might be—is just one among a host of variables that, in combination, affect selling effectiveness.

**EXPERIMENT 3**

Although the previous two experiments suggest that attractive sellers are accorded more favorable perceptions and treatment than their unattractive counterparts, these findings are limited in several ways. In both experiments, for example, attractiveness was operationalized with facial photographs. And the second experiment relied on a role-playing exercise. Accordingly, in Experiment 3 we moved beyond the hypothetical and presented our attractiveness manipulations in their *propria persona* while assessing target subjects’ actual behavior in response to a bona fide request. Specifically, we tested compliance with a request to donate money to the American Heart Association, using a field setting wherein male and female solicitors differed in physical attractiveness. To avoid embarrassment, they were led to believe that they were participating in an experiment to investigate the effects of touching or not touching a male or female target person on compliance with a request to donate money (Kleinke, 1977).

**Method**

Subjects (359 male and female undergraduates) were assigned at random to a 2 (Attractiveness of Solicitor) × 2 (Sex of Solicitor) × 2 (Sex of Target Person) × 2 (Touching of Target Person) between-subjects design.

Solicitors were 3 male and 3 female undergraduate students who were judged a priori as either more attractive or less attractive (3 solicitors, respectively) based on personal cognition. Photographs were taken of the solicitors; this was explained to them as being a necessary campus security measure. In reality, however, the photographs were judged by 5 male and 5 female students on a 6-point unattractive–attractive scale. The ANOVA for the repeated-measures design resulted in a significant difference in mean attractiveness scores for the 3 more attractive ($M = 4.13$) and the 3 less attractive ($M = 2.67$) solicitors, $F(1, 9) = 28.18, p < .01$.

Solicitors approached every third person who passed a stationary location and said: “I’m collecting for the Heart Fund. Would you make a small donation?” Subjects in the touch treatment were touched lightly on the arm.
Results

The ANOVA on donation data for all subjects showed significant main effects for solicitor attractiveness, $F(1, 343) = 4.70, p < .05$, and for touching, $F(1, 343) = 5.47, p < .05$. All other main effects and all interaction effects were nonsignificant, except for the four-way interaction, $F(1, 343) = 5.08, p < .05$. However, because of likely demand bias resulting from informing solicitors about the touching manipulation and the fact that it is not central to this discussion, we consider only the main effect for solicitor attractiveness here. Whereas the average donation for all contacts was significantly higher for the more attractive solicitors than for the less attractive ones ($M_s = 0.16$ vs. $0.08, p < .01$), no significant difference was found in the means for the subjects who actually donated ($M_s = 0.37$ vs. $0.35$ for those with more attractive and less attractive solicitors, respectively). Thus, the attractiveness manipulation significantly affected only the proportion of subjects who complied with the request to donate money. Of the 176 subjects in the more attractive condition, 74 (42%) yielded to the request, whereas only 43 (23%) of the 183 subjects in the less attractive condition complied with it ($z = 3.74, p < .05$).

Discussion

The results of this last experiment suggest that physical attractiveness has an efficacy beyond that of cognition and conation—that it induces actual behavior among populations of target perceivers. Other than their superior appearance (which was not of movie-star magnitude but which was discernible) the more attractive solicitors behaved in all significant ways equivalently to the less attractive ones. Apparently, better looks alone induced a greater incidence (if not a significantly larger size) of compliance. This result might be explained by some recent findings of Ajzen and Driver (1992). They ascertained that whether people are willing to pay (for leisure activities) is decided on the basis of cognitive heuristics but how much they are willing to pay (for them) requires substantive deliberation. Although the context of Ajzen and Driver’s work differs from ours, the underlying processes involved seem quite similar. Whether to pay for a leisure activity is not conceptually different from whether to donate to the Heart Fund; the former is decided on the basis of mood and the latter on the basis of the solicitor’s attractiveness—both simple heuristics. Similarly, how much to pay for a leisure activity is like how much to donate to the Heart Fund—both require some deliberation. This whether versus how-much distinction may represent yet
another manifestation of the “dual routes” to persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

One conclusion to be drawn from this series of three experiments is wholly undramatic: The traditional practice of emphasizing “good appearance” for salespersons makes sense. The beautiful-is-better stereotype is not myth; it has empirical validity. Moreover, we seem quite willing to allow this stereotype to affect our behavior as consumers (as well as in other walks of life). Such behavior may not be wise—and according privilege on the basis of an unearned characteristic such as physical beauty is hardly democratic—yet it seems to be a fact of life. It is not surprising, therefore, that companies want their salespersons to be good-looking, because this characteristic appears to make them more effective.

Except for some advertising (or advertisinglike) applications, the commercial effect of the physical attractiveness stereotype has not been studied extensively. This is curious for such a seemingly ubiquitous phenomenon, but perhaps understandable on the basis that measuring the psychological effectiveness of physical beauty might be regarded as undignified. Nevertheless, Eagly et al. (1991) identified the conceptual mechanism (implicit personality theory) through which another person’s physical attractiveness likely affects our behavior. It remains, however, to specify how the effect makes its way through the target person’s response hierarchy. We know that the effect is greatest on initial cognition (Debevec et al., 1986) but much more about its workings needs to be studied. For example, we need to move beyond the simplistic notion that physical attractiveness is soley a physiognomic phenomenon. Alicke et al. (1986) offer compelling evidence—albeit with restrictive stimuli (photos of women in swimsuits)—that bodies are at least as important as faces in both males’ and females’ assessments of attractiveness. (Women with pretty faces but unbecoming bodies were judged to be less attractive than those with well-turned bodies but ugly faces.) To say that someone is “good-looking” likely refers to a Gestalt impression—the person’s face, body, grooming, clothing, and deportment, taken together. What most extant research on “physical attractiveness” (including this article) really shows, then, is the effect of facial beauty with all these other factors (and their interactions) held constant, a limitation we seldom take care to emphasize.

The many questions remaining to be investigated might be grouped under two, likely correlated, headings: (a) social context and (b) individual-difference factors. Under the former would fall such questions as how long in the course of dyadic interaction the physical attractiveness of an actor is important (when do other factors “neutralize” it?) and whether attractiveness is uniformly
important across a wide variety of selling situations (is there really a "product" effect or interaction?). The latter grouping would include questions on whether physical attractiveness varies in importance across age, social status, and ethnicity of the persons who are party to the interaction. Because our experimental subjects were college students, it is possible that the extent (though not the nature) of effect observed differs from what might be encountered among more diverse populations. Downs, Reagan, Garrett, and Kolodzy (1982), for example, provided data on the susceptibility of various groups of people (1,139 respondents, ages 12 to 65) to the physical attractiveness stereotype. Based on their Attitudes Toward Physical Attractiveness Scale (ATPAS), it appears that males are more susceptible to stereotypic thinking about attractiveness than are females; that adolescents (ages 12 to 18) are more prone to such perceptions than are adults (19 and older); and that Whites hold attractiveness stereotypes more than do Hispanics who, in turn, hold them more than do African Americans. These findings no doubt reflect a historical emphasis on the use of youthful, White, female models in the mass media.

Finally, we reemphasize that a salesperson’s physical attractiveness appears to have its greatest effect on buyers’ initial impressions of him or her and that appearance is only one among a host of factors that might ultimately determine selling effectiveness. But initial impressions can linger and, to the extent that they do, buyers’ information processing and their behavior is likely to be stereotypically governed. When that occurs, books will be judged by their covers.

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REFERENCES


5The ATPAS contains 34 items, each scored 1 through 7, with a total range of 34 (least stereotypic perceptions) to 238 (most stereotypic). Internal consistency was reported as .90 to .92 for the samples tested. Test–retest reliability ranged from .83 to .91.

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