



Differences in expressivity based on attractiveness: Target or perceiver effects? ☆



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We examined if the attractiveness–expressivity association was nonlinear.
- It was evident for high and low attractive females and medium attractive males only.
- We examined reasons as to why the association might exist.
- Females differing in attractiveness showed actual differences in expressivity.
- Attractiveness influenced adults' judgments of females and males' expressivity.

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ABSTRACT

A significant association exists between adults' expressivity and facial attractiveness, but it is unclear whether the association is linear or significant only at the extremes of attractiveness. It is also unclear whether attractive persons actually display more positive expressivity than unattractive persons (target effects) or whether high or low attractiveness influences expressivity valence judgments (perceiver effects). Experiment 1 demonstrated that adult ratings of attractiveness were predictive of expressivity valence only for high and low attractive females and medium attractive males. Experiment 2 showed that low attractive females actually display more negative expressivity than medium and high attractive females, but there were no target effects for males. Also, attractiveness influenced expressivity valence judgments (perceiver effects) for both females and males. Our findings demonstrate that low attractive females are at a particular disadvantage during social interactions due to their low attractiveness, actual displays of negative expressivity, and perceptions of their negative expressivity.

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A person's facial attractiveness and emotional expression can greatly impact how others socially interact with that person. Perceivers treat attractive persons more positively and provide them with more attention, rewards, help, and cooperation than unattractive persons, regardless of familiarity (Langlois et al., 2000). Perceivers approach persons displaying positive (happy) emotions more often than those displaying negative (angry) emotions (Marsh, Ambady, & Kleck, 2005; Seidel, Habel, Kirschner, Gur, & Derntl, 2010). Attractiveness and emotional expressivity influence critical behaviors during social interactions, and there appears

to be a positive association between attractiveness and positivity of expression (Bohrn, Carbon, & Hutzler, 2010; Penton-Voak & Chang, 2008; Reis et al., 1990; Rhodes, Sumich, & Byatt, 1999), but it is not clear 1) whether it is evident across all levels of attractiveness or only extreme levels of attractiveness or 2) why this association exists. Investigating these questions is important because high attractive individuals might be at an advantage during social interactions due not only to their attractiveness, but also to actual displays and/or perceptions of their positive expressivity, whereas low attractive individuals might be at a disadvantage due to their attractiveness and actual displays and/or perceptions of their negative expressivity. The main goals of this research were to test the attractiveness–expressivity association at different levels of attractiveness and possible explanations for it.

Tenets of social, developmental, and evolutionary psychology theories suggest reasons as to why expressivity and attractiveness are related, particularly for those high or low in attractiveness (Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991; Scarr & McCartney, 1983; Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977; Thornhill & Gangestad, 1993, 1999; Zebrowitz, 2004). Based on these theories, one hypothesis

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is that the attractiveness–expressivity association is an accurate reflection of the target’s attributes: High attractive individuals truly display more positive expressivity than low attractive individuals. The other hypothesis is that the association is due to perceiver effects. Judgments of attractiveness and emotional expressivity are rapid and automatic and impact how positively or negatively perceivers feel about a target (Todorov, Said, Engell, & Oosterhof, 2008). Unconscious judgments of attractiveness may therefore impact conscious ratings of expressivity valence or vice versa. The hypotheses regarding target and perceiver effects are not mutually exclusive, and both could contribute to the attractiveness–expressivity association.

1. The attractiveness–expressivity association

Researchers have examined the attractiveness–expressivity association by having judges 1) rate *only* the physical attractiveness of targets posing different facial expressions varying in positive affect (e.g., Mueser, Grau, Sussman, & Rosen, 1984; O’Doherty et al., 2003; Reis et al., 1990), or 2) rate *both* the physical attractiveness and pleasantness of targets (e.g., Rhodes et al., 1999; Werheid, Schacht, & Sommer, 2007). Other work has examined the relation between physical attractiveness and nonverbal expressiveness in general (e.g., Friedman, Riggio, & Casella, 1988; Sabatelli & Rubin, 1986), but that research did not examine the valence of targets’ expressiveness and is, therefore, not included in our review of the literature. Note that we will use the term “neutral expression” in our review and throughout the paper and although a neutral face presumably reflects an absence of expression, there is evidence to suggest that adults do treat it as an emotion, somewhat similar to other mild expressions (e.g., bored, tired, mildly surprised; Shah & Lewis, 2003).

For the studies that had adults rate only the physical attractiveness of individuals posing different facial expressions, there are inconsistencies among the results. Reis et al. (1990) showed that adults rated both males and females as more attractive when they were smiling as compared to when they were posing a non-smiling, neutral expression. Even though a smile increased attractiveness, it generally did not change the overall rank order of the person’s attractiveness level (Reis et al., 1990). In other studies, adults rated the attractiveness of individuals posing neutral expressions and happy or mildly happy expressions similarly (Mueser et al., 1984; O’Doherty et al., 2003). In addition, some have found that smiling or positive expressivity enhances attractiveness for female faces only (Penton-Voak & Chang, 2008; Raines, Hechtman, & Rosenthal, 1990; Schulman & Hoskins, 1986; Tracy & Beall, 2011). Taken together, these findings suggest that smiling *may* enhance attractiveness, but is not sufficient to make someone attractive.

There appears to be more consistency among results for studies that had participants rate both the attractiveness and happiness or pleasantness of faces. Across static faces posing different expressions or only neutral expressions, adult ratings of the pleasantness or happiness of faces positively correlated with attractiveness ratings (Mueser et al., 1984; Pizzagalli et al., 2002; Werheid et al., 2007). Furthermore, for static faces posing neutral expressions, attractiveness correlated more strongly with positive expressivity than it correlated with averageness, distinctiveness, or symmetry, and the attractiveness–expressivity correlation was higher for female than for male faces (Rhodes et al., 1999). One exception to these findings is a study that did not find a significant correlation between expressivity and attractiveness for female faces presented statically, but did find a positive association when presented dynamically (Rubenstein, 2005). Despite some inconsistencies across studies, results suggest the attractiveness–expressivity association is relatively robust, particularly for neutral expressions and female faces.

The sex differences found in the various studies may have occurred because adults show implicit associations between male faces and angry expressions and between female faces and happy expressions

(Becker, Kenrick, Neuberg, Blackwell, & Smith, 2007). Adults rate female expressions of happiness as more intense than male expressions of happiness, particularly when the actual intensity of the target face is closer to a neutral expression than a full-blown happy expression (Hess, Blairy, & Kleck, 1997). Furthermore, adults are more likely to categorize neutral male faces than neutral female faces as angry (Becker et al., 2007). These findings, however, are not solely due to implicit associations. Males’ neutral facial expressions are more structurally similar to angry expressions than are females’ neutral expressions (Zebrowitz, Kikuchi, & Fellous, 2010). Differential cognitive associations for females and males and actual differences in facial structure may contribute to sex discrepancies in the attractiveness–expressivity association.

2. Target effects

The attractiveness–expressivity association might exist because high and low attractive individuals actually differ in their expressivity valence; high attractive individuals exhibit more positive expressivity than low attractive individuals. Such behavioral differences might be present due to differential treatment (Eagly et al., 1991), qualities inherent in the individual (Buss & Barnes, 1986; Thornhill & Gangestad, 1993), or an interaction of the two (Scarr & McCartney, 1983). Another possibility is that physiognomic differences between high and low attractive faces affect judgments of facial expression just as structural differences between neutral female and male faces impact categorization of expressions (Zebrowitz et al., 2010). For example, the symmetry or averageness of high attractive relative to low attractive faces (Fink & Penton-Voak, 2002; Langlois & Roggman, 1990; Rhodes & Tremewan, 1996) might make certain facial features or the person’s overall facial configuration appear more positively expressive.

Implicit personality theory proposes that individuals implicitly learn associations between personal attributes and social category membership (e.g., facial attractiveness) as they interact with others and attempt to understand social behaviors (Eagly et al., 1991). One outcome of this cognitive processing is that perceivers expect a target to behave in a manner that corresponds to their implicitly learned associations (Eagly et al., 1991). Such expectations should impact how the perceiver interacts with the target and subsequently how the target responds to those interactions. Indeed, individuals more often smile, engage in prosocial behavior, allocate attention, and help high attractive targets compared to low attractive targets (Langlois et al., 2000). The positive treatment high attractive targets experience should typically elicit positive behaviors and result in them developing positive attributes, whereas the negative treatment low attractive targets experience should show the reverse outcome (Langlois et al., 2000; Snyder et al., 1977).

High and low attractive individuals do show differences in behaviors. High attractive individuals are more popular than low attractive individuals, and they exhibit better social skills (Langlois et al., 2000). Facial attractiveness is also related to self-reported extraversion and others’ judgments of that person’s extraversion (Albright, Kenny, & Malloy, 1988; Kenny, Horner, Kashy, & Chu, 1992; Meier, Robinson, Carter, & Hinsz, 2010; Zebrowitz, Collins, & Dutta, 1998). Being the recipient of positive treatment and being more socially skilled and extraverted should translate to high attractive individuals displaying more positive expressivity than low attractive individuals. It is possible, however, that low attractive females display more negative expressivity than other females because children and adults judge them more negatively and less positively compared to medium and high attractive females (Griffin & Langlois, 2006). If these judgments translate to poorer treatment of low attractive females compared to medium and high attractive females, then slightly negative displays of emotion might become evident in low attractive females’ neutral expressions over time.

Attractiveness might also be related to expressivity because expressivity is a true reflection of phenotypic quality, health, and mate value

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