

Allen with his usual lopsided grin (A) and Woody Allen with an unnervingly misplaced eye (–A), as well as Danny DeVito (B) and a slightly disfigured version of Danny DeVito (–B).

For each of the 12 photographs, in fact, I now had a regular version as well as an inferior (–) decoy version. (See the illustration for an example of the two conditions used in the study.)

It was now time for the main part of the experiment. I took all the sets of pictures and made my way over to the student union. Approaching one student after another, I asked each to participate. When the students agreed, I handed them a sheet with three pictures (as in the illustration here). Some of them had the regular picture (A), the decoy of that picture (–A), and the other regular picture (B). Others had the regular picture (B), the decoy of that picture (–B), and the other regular picture (A).

For example, a set might include a regular Clooney (A), a decoy Clooney (–A), and a regular Pitt (B); or a regular Pitt (B), a decoy Pitt (–B), and a regular Clooney (A). After selecting a sheet with either male or female pictures, according to their preferences, I asked the students to circle the people they would pick to go on a date with, if they had a choice. All this took quite a while, and when I was done, I had distributed 600 sheets.

What was my motive in all this? Simply to determine if the existence of the distorted picture (–A or –B) would push my participants to choose the similar but undistorted picture. In other words, would a slightly less attractive George Clooney (–A) push the participants to choose the perfect George Clooney over the perfect Brad Pitt?

There were no pictures of Brad Pitt or George Clooney in my experiment, of course. Pictures (A) and (B) showed ordi-