Attractiveness Bias

A tendency to see attractive people as more intelligent, competent, moral, and sociable than unattractive people.[1]

Attractive people are generally perceived more positively than unattractive people. They receive more attention from the opposite sex, receive more affection from their mothers, receive more leniency from judges and juries, and receive more votes from the electorate than do unattractive people. All other variables being equal, attractive people are preferred in hiring decisions, and will make more money doing the same work than unattractive people. The attractiveness bias is a function of both biological and environmental factors.[2]

Biologically speaking, people are attractive when they exude health and fertility. Good biological measures for health and fertility are average and symmetrical facial features, and a waist-to-hip ratio in the ideal range (0.70 for women, 0.90 for men). An absence of these features is thought to be an indicator of malnutrition, disease, or bad genes; none of which are preferable attributes for a potential mate. Biological factors of attraction are innate and true across cultures. For example, in studies presenting images of attractive and unattractive people to babies (two-months-old and six-months-old), the babies looked longer at the attractive people regardless of their gender, age, or race.[3]

Environmentally speaking, men are attracted to women when they exaggerate socially acknowledged features of sexuality (e.g., lipstick to exaggerate lips); and women are attracted to men when they appear to possess wealth and power (e.g., expensive automobiles). For example, in studies presenting images of attractive and unattractive people to men and women, along with descriptions of their occupations, women preferred unattractive men with high-paying occupations equally to attractive men with medium-paying occupations. However, men never preferred unattractive women regardless of their financial status. Environmental factors of attraction vary considerably across cultures.[4]

Consider the attractiveness bias in design contexts involving images of people, such as marketing and advertising. When the presentation of attractive women is a key element of a design, use renderings or images of women with waist-to-hip ratios of approximately 0.70, accented by culturally appropriate augmentations of sexual features. When the presentation of attractive men is a key element of a design, use renderings or images of men with waist-to-hip ratios of approximately 0.90, and visible indicators of wealth or status (e.g., expensive clothing).

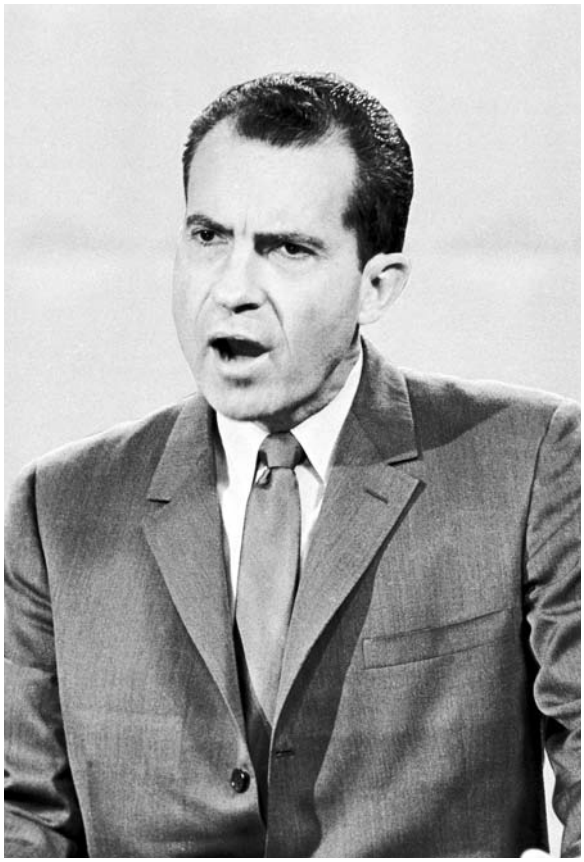
See also Anthropomorphic Form, Baby-Face Bias, Most Average Facial Appearance Effect, Red Effect, and Waist-to-Hip Ratio.

[1] Also known as *look-ism*.

[2] The seminal work on the attractiveness bias is "What Is Beautiful Is Good" by Karen Dion, Ellen Berscheid, and Elaine Walster, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1972, vol. 24(3), p. 285–290. A nice contemporary review of the attractiveness bias research is "Maxims or Myths of Beauty? A Meta-analytic and Theoretical Review" by Judith H. Langlois, et al., *Psychological Bulletin*, 2000, vol. 126(3), p. 390–423.

[3] See, for example, "Baby Beautiful: Adult Attributions of Infant Competence as a Function of Infant Attractiveness" by Cookie W. Stephan and Judith H. Langlois, *Child Development*, 1984, vol. 55, p. 576–585.

[4] *Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty* by Nancy Etcoff, Anchor Books, 2000.



The first presidential debate between Richard Nixon and John Kennedy (1960) is a classic demonstration of the attractiveness bias. Nixon was ill and running a fever. He wore light colors and no makeup, further whitening his already pale complexion and contrasting his five-o'clock shadow. Kennedy wore dark colors, makeup, and practiced his delivery in a studio prior to the debate. People who listened to the debate by radio believed Nixon to be the winner. However, people who watched the debate on TV came to a very different conclusion.