

In Search of the “Beauty is Beastly” Effect

Kenneth E. Podratz

Robert L. Dipboye

Rice University

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ABSTRACT

Conflicting heuristics in the physical attractiveness bias literature—the “what is beautiful is good” stereotype, and the “beauty is beastly” effect were tested in a stimulus sampling procedure using over 200 photographs. Stimuli were rated on attractiveness and on employment suitability for male and female sex-typed jobs.

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Research investigating the effects of physical attractiveness bias on personnel decision-making has produced two sets of findings that are seemingly contradictory. The bulk of the research has supported the heuristic that, when it comes to the perception of people based on physical appearance, “what is beautiful is good.” According to this heuristic, individuals perceived as physically attractive are also initially assumed to possess a full gamut of positive human traits that the unattractive are assumed to lack (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). This heuristic often biases personnel decision-making in favor of physically attractive job applicants and employees. A wealth of research has shown that indeed the physically attractive enjoy advantages over the less attractive in matters of personnel selection and performance assessment (e.g., Beehr & Gilmore, 1982; Morrow, 1990; Shahani, Dipboye, & Gehrlein, 1993).

A pair of findings have been reported, however, which stand in stark contrast to the “what is beautiful is good” heuristic. In these findings physical attractiveness was found to be a liability for women seeking certain types of employment (Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979; Heilman & Stopeck, 1985a). This odd effect, termed the “beauty is beastly” effect by Heilman and Saruwatari (1979), is reported to sometimes occur when women seek male sex-typed positions (Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979; Heilman & Stopeck, 1985a). The occurrence of the effect, however, can best be described as sporadic, as many researchers have not only failed to find evidence of the effect, but have found evidence in direct contradiction with the effect (Dipboye, Fromkin, & Wiback, 1975; Drogosz & Levy, 1996; Gilmore, Beehr, & Love, 1986; Marlowe, Schneider, & Nelson, 1996; Sigelman, Thomas, Sigelman, & Ribich, 1986).

In a meta-analytic review of the social psychological research on physical attractiveness bias, Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, and Longo (1991) reported that the “what is beautiful is good” stereotype influenced attributions of specific types of “goodness.” According to their findings, the stereotype is at its strongest when attributions of social competence are made; the physically attractive are seen as much more extraverted and socially skilled than the physically unattractive. Although their review included few studies from industrial/organizational research, the series of mean effect sizes reported by Eagly et al. appear to offer overwhelming support for the “what is beautiful is good” stereotype. Two types of attributions that appeared much less affected by the stereotype included “integrity” and “concern for others,” but in neither of these areas was physical attractiveness found to be a liability.

A more recent meta-analysis, focused more on the industrial/organizational psychological literature, also failed to find support for the “beauty is beastly” effect (Hosoda, Coats, Stone-Romero, & Backus, 1999). The authors found that physical attractiveness was always an asset for males, and that it was usually an asset for females. Hosoda and her colleagues did identify a small subset of studies featuring female targets in jobs considered by the authors of those studies to be stereotypically masculine, for which the mean effect size was not statistically different from zero, but noted that this result failed to provide any support for the “beauty is beastly” effect.

The studies reporting the “beauty is beastly” effect (Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979; Heilman & Stopeck, 1985a) are among a handful of studies that have claimed that physical attractiveness can pose a potential liability, yet despite the lack of concurring empirical support the effect is widely cited in the physical attractiveness literature. Two other studies claiming to support the “beauty is beastly” effect (Heilman & Stopeck, 1985b; Spencer & Taylor, 1988) both

involve the effects of physical attractiveness on causal attributions for success. Spencer and Taylor reported that good performance by physically attractive female managers was attributed to luck and bias to a greater extent than it was for unattractive female managers. Such findings do not necessarily contradict the “what is beautiful is good” stereotype, but merely show that people acknowledge that beauty is an asset that can be used for personal gain. In fact, Spencer and Taylor also reported that physically attractive female managers received higher performance ratings than their physically unattractive counterparts—a finding which actually contradicts the “beauty is beastly” effect. In a similar study, Heilman and Stopeck (1985b) had subjects make causal attributions for the career progress of an Assistant Vice President who was either physically attractive or unattractive and either male or female. Heilman and Stopeck, likewise, found that the progress of attractive females was attributed to luck to a greater extent than that of their unattractive counterparts, whereas the progress of unattractive females was attributed to ability to a greater extent than that of attractive females. Heilman and Stopeck frame these results as “evidence that being attractive can have negative consequences for women managers” (p. 386), but, as the findings of Spencer and Taylor (1988) suggest (though not framed as such by Spencer and Taylor), the results may merely be evidence of an awareness that physical attractiveness can sometimes be used for personal gain.

Heilman and Saruwatari (1979) also point to research by others (Cash et al., 1977; Dipboye et al., 1977) as supporting their “beauty is beastly” hypothesis. Although consistent with Heilman and Saruwatari’s hypothesis, however, in neither of the two cases do the reported data provide statistically significant evidence in support of their hypothesis. Thus two studies (Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979; Heilman & Stopeck, 1985a) stand alone as the only clear demonstration of the “beauty is beastly” effect.

One of the unfortunate characteristics of a majority of prior research on physical attractiveness biases is that little attention has been paid to the issue of stimulus sampling. In 20 studies that we reviewed in this area, the number of photographs used in each attractiveness cell (or attractiveness by gender and/or race) ranged from 1 to 6, averaging only 2.3—the typical study using only 1 or 2 photos per experimental condition. Using such a small number of stimulus photographs places severe limitations on the extent to which one can generalize any results, and renders generalization across stimuli virtually impossible (Fontenelle, Phillips, & Lane, 1985). Heilman and Saruwatari (1979) used only two photographs per condition in their study, and Heilman and Stopeck (1985a) used the very same set of photographs used by Heilman and Saruwatari. Thus the existing empirical support for the “beauty is beastly” effect appears to hinge on a single set of four photographs.

It is quite possible that the “beauty is beastly” effect was merely the result of idiosyncratic differences among the stimulus photographs used in the studies finding the effect (Dipboye, 1992; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). Hatfield and Sprecher suggest that the photographs used by Heilman and her colleagues, may have differed not only in physical attractiveness but in appropriateness. Hatfield and Sprecher speculate that the attractive women used in these studies might have had hair that was “too long and sultry,” or that “they wore the wrong kind of makeup” (p.60), and thus might have appeared less businesslike than the plainer, less attractive women; however, their argument was based on speculation rather than an actual examination of the photographs. Hatfield and Sprecher posit that women seeking management positions can look as attractive as they want to, so long as their hairstyle and dress are appropriate (i.e., businesslike), proposing that there may be more elements to physical appearance than mere

physical attractiveness, any of which may lead to appearance-based attributions and pose as potential confounds to physical attractiveness in studies using too few stimuli.

In one attempt to shed some light on these elements of physical appearance, Bieber and Dipboye (1988) obtained student ratings of photographs of 100 males and 100 females on a series of bipolar adjective pairs and identified different factor structures for male and female physical appearance. Bieber and Dipboye found low correlations between physical attractiveness and dimensions based on intelligence and competence for both males and females, suggesting that appearance-based attributions of intelligence and competence may be relatively independent of physical attractiveness. When they subsequently had students rate the same 200 photographs on perceived managerial qualifications, physical attractiveness was highly correlated with managerial qualifications for both males and females, consistent with the “what is beautiful is good” heuristic. Furthermore, perceived competence, which was relatively independent of physical attractiveness, was also highly correlated with managerial qualifications. Thus, the potential confounding of physical attractiveness and perceptions of intelligence or competence in studies using too few stimulus photographs might be a source of spurious “beauty is beastly” findings.

The current study is the first in a series of studies devised to investigate the nature of the “beauty is beastly” effect. In this series of studies we hope to test these two conflicting heuristics and identify the conditions under which a “beauty is beastly” effect is likely to occur. In the current stimulus sampling study, stimulus photos were rated on physical attractiveness, a number of personal traits, and suitability for employment in various sex-typed jobs, including a management job and a clerical job. The data on physical attractiveness and perceived suitability for employment were used in this study to test competing hypotheses. The data on personal

traits was collected primarily for exploratory purposes, and will likely be used in ongoing investigations that are not discussed in any detail here.

According to the “what is beautiful is good” heuristic, physically attractive individuals are perceived more positively than their less attractive counterparts on a full array of personal traits, including those traits considered to make certain individuals more suitable than others for employment in certain jobs. Thus in order to investigate whether the “what is beautiful is good” heuristic was supported in our study, we tested the following hypothesis:

“What is beautiful is good” hypothesis: Physically attractive stimuli will be rated higher than physically unattractive stimuli on employment suitability in all jobs studied for both males and females.

According to the “beauty is beastly” hypothesis proffered by Heilman and Saruwatari (1979) and Heilman and Stopeck (1985), physically attractive women are seen as more feminine than less attractive women and, thus, less qualified for male sex-typed positions. The “beauty is beastly” hypothesis would predict the following:

“Beauty is beastly” hypothesis #1: Physically attractive female stimuli will be rated as less suitable than physically unattractive female stimuli for employment in male sex-typed jobs.

As a logical extension of the above hypothesis, physically attractive men should be seen as more masculine than less attractive men and, thus less qualified for female sex-typed positions. We therefore tested the following hypothesis as well:

“Beauty is beastly” hypothesis #2: Physically attractive male stimuli will be rated as less suitable than physically unattractive male stimuli for employment in female sex-typed jobs.

Method

Participants

Forty-two undergraduate psychology students (21 male, 21 female, mean age = 19.1 years, SD = 1) participated in this study. The self-reported ethnicity of the sample was 40.5% Caucasian, 33.3% Hispanic, 30.1% Asian-American, and 7.1% African-American (total greater than 100%, because some participants reported membership in more than one category).

Stimulus photographs

A sample of 204 photographs (102 males, and 102 females) was selected from a recent university yearbook. All of the photographs selected were of Caucasian, university seniors, free from gross facial disfigurements, dressed in interview-appropriate clothing, and not wearing eyeglasses.

Physical Attractiveness Ratings

All 204 photographs were rated for physical attractiveness on a 7-point Likert-type scale. For exploratory purposes, all 204 photographs were also rated on a series of bipolar trait dimensions based on the Big Five factors of personality (McCrae & Costa, 1987) or derived or borrowed from the physical attractiveness literature (Berry, 1991; Bieber & Dipboye, 1988; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986; Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979; Zebrowitz, Voinescu, & Collins, 1996). The trait dimension data was collected for possible use in future investigations of the nature of “beauty is beastly” effects in the event that they are found. Only the physical attractiveness ratings were used to test hypotheses in the current study.

Target jobs

All photographs were also rated on employment suitability for five jobs. Two of the jobs, “Marketing Manager” and “Executive Secretary,” were included for their similarity to the jobs

included in studies that have demonstrated a “beauty is beastly” effect (Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979; Heilman & Stopeck, 1985). In order to conduct a more complete test of the “beauty is beastly” hypothesis we included three additional jobs—one male sex-typed, one female sex-typed, and one gender-neutral. We pilot test 34 job titles in order to determine the sex-type of each job. Borrowing from methods used by Krefting, Berger, and Wallace (1978), participants were given a list of job titles and asked to classify them as best suited for either a male or a female. We asked participants to imagine that they had to predict who would be likely to be the most successful and satisfied in each job, presenting them with a forced choice of either “male” or “female.” Participants in the pilot test were then asked to speculate the percentage of people holding those jobs in the real world who are male or female. Participants were also asked to rate the status of each job on a seven-point Likert-type scale, anchored by “high” and “low.” Finally, participants were asked to rate those jobs in terms of the extent to which physical appearance is important on a seven-point Likert-type scale, anchored by “very important” and “very unimportant.” The marketing manager and executive secretary positions were included in the pilot test in order to obtain sex-type data on these positions. The results of this pilot test are shown in Table 1.

The pilot study showed that the position of “Corporate Sales Manager” was male sex-typed and the position of “Executive Secretary” was female sex-typed (see Table 1). Based on the results of the pilot study, we selected the positions of “Director of Security” and “Counselor for Abused Children” as the other male sex-typed and female sex-typed positions, respectively, because they were highly sex-typed, and were closely matched on ratings of status and importance of appearance. We included the position of “Public Relations Officer” as a relatively gender neutral job title.

Design

In the current study it is primarily the stimuli that are being studied rather than the participants. For this reason the level of analysis is the stimulus. We tested hypotheses using a 2 x 3 x 5 mixed design, with gender and physical attractiveness (unattractive, average, attractive) as between stimuli factors, and job title (x5) as a within stimuli factor. Ratings of employment suitability served as the dependent variable.

Procedure

In a departure from typical stimulus rating procedures, in which a participant usually rates photographic stimuli on a series of bipolar dimensions, each participant in this study rated the entire set of 204 stimulus photographs on four bipolar dimensions, one dimension at a time in order to minimize the occurrence of halo effects. Each participant was randomly assigned four dimensions on which to rate the photographs. Each participant was presented with the entire set of 204 photographs printed on business cards. Participants were asked to sort the 204 photographs into seven numbered trays, each tray representing a point on a Likert-type scale, according to their perceptions of those photographs with respect to one of the bipolar dimensions under investigation. Participants performed the process completely for one dimension and then repeated the process for each of the remaining dimensions.

Results

The data obtained from each participant was transformed to z-scores one dimension at a time prior to comprehensive analysis of the data set. This process allowed the responses of different participants, whose use of a seven-point scale might have differed systematically (e.g., leniency, avoidance of extreme scores), to be combined in a uniform scale. Consequently, mean scores for all dependent variables are reported as z-scores.

We trichotomized the physical attractiveness variable in order to analyze our data using an ANOVA. We performed a repeated measures ANOVA on the overall 2 x 3 x 5 design to test for statistically significant effects (see Table 2). We found a strong main effect for physical attractiveness, in which physically attractive stimuli were rated as more suitable for employment than average stimuli, who were in turn rated as more suitable for employment than physically unattractive stimuli, $F(1, 198) = 118.16, p < 0.001$. As shown in Figure 1, this physical attractiveness effect worked in the same direction for all five jobs studied. We also found a statistically significant gender x physical attractiveness x job title interaction, $F(8, 792) = 10.1, p < 0.001$, indicating the presence of a gender x physical attractiveness interaction for one or more of the jobs.

In order to identify the statistically significant gender x physical attractiveness interactions, we performed univariate ANOVAs for all five of the job titles under investigation (see Tables 3-7). We found significant interactions for the job titles of “Executive Secretary,” $F(2, 198) = 15.93, p < 0.001$, and “Director of Security,” $F(2, 198) = 25.07, p < 0.001$. As displayed in Figure 2, the gender x physical attractiveness interaction in the case of the “Executive Secretary” job was due merely to differences in the degree of bias, as the physically attractive stimuli were rated more favorably than less attractive stimuli for both males and females. Thus, “beauty is beastly” hypothesis #2 was not supported. As shown in Figure 3, in the “Director of Security” job a strong physical attractiveness effect occurred for male stimuli, but not for female stimuli. Further analysis showed that the physical attractiveness effect for female stimuli was not statistically significant, $F(2, 99) = 0.12, p = 0.89$. Thus, “beauty is beastly” hypothesis #1 was not supported.

The “what is beautiful is good” hypothesis received strong general support, as shown in Figure 1; however, the lack of a physical attractiveness bias for women in the “Director of Security” job suggests that this effect may not be universal.

Discussion

The results of this study offer general support to the strength of the “what is beautiful is good” heuristic, and no support for the “beauty is beastly” effect. This study has addressed the problem of sufficient stimulus sampling, but some questions still remain to be addressed. Are there any jobs for which a “beauty is beastly” effect will reliably occur? This study only looked at five jobs, which arguably leads to problems similar to those involving stimulus sampling (i.e., job sampling). Because of this problem we are now in the process of studying a much larger sample of jobs in order to more thoroughly search for “beauty is beastly” effects. If we can find jobs for which such effects occur, we hope to identify the specific aspects of those jobs that make them amenable to such effects.

It is also possible that no such jobs will be found, in which case an investigation into the specific types of stimuli that can lead to spurious “beauty is beastly” effects may be in order. Perhaps there are aspects of physical appearance independent of physical attractiveness that, when confounded with physical attractiveness, may produce misleading results. We hesitate to venture in this direction without first examining a larger sample of jobs, because finding effects for only one or two jobs may not be any more meaningful than finding effects for only one or two stimuli, or one or two participants. Findings in this area will only be truly generalizable when they can generalize to participant populations, stimulus populations, and job populations. We hope we have taken a step in that direction.

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Table 1

Pilot Test Results

Job Title	D	E	S	A
Cosmetics Salesperson	0.0	10.52	3.00	6.15
Secretary	0.0	20.30	3.21	4.97
Nurse	1.5	27.11	4.37	4.05
Counselor for Abused Children	1.5	30.51	4.49	4.04
Lingerie Salesperson	3.0	7.60	3.03	6.01
Office Receptionist	3.0	22.28	2.84	4.93
Director of Day Care Services	4.5	22.64	3.83	4.17
Executive Secretary	4.5	23.85	4.09	5.25
Social Worker	6.0	35.63	3.87	3.79
Dietician	9.0	35.67	3.96	5.22
Switchboard Operator	17.9	34.19	2.58	1.55
Bank Teller	19.4	38.55	3.31	3.84
Human Resource Manager	32.8	48.63	4.70	4.33
Customer Service Manager	34.3	48.99	4.13	4.18
Public Relations Officer	35.8	48.90	4.58	5.31
Motel Desk Clerk	43.3	49.45	2.63	3.85
Photo Lab Assistant	49.3	48.82	2.64	2.18
Journalist	52.2	53.58	4.61	4.25

Table 1 continued

Job Title	D	E	S	A
Marketing Manager	62.7	59.18	5.15	4.81
Office Manager	68.7	60.55	4.76	4.49
Mailroom Clerk	73.1	55.73	2.10	1.88
Sales Manager	80.6	61.19	4.42	4.85
Shipping & Receiving Clerk	83.6	62.61	2.78	2.19
Corporate Sales Manager	88.1	66.93	5.33	4.76
Manager of R&D Dept.	91.0	68.03	5.36	3.48
Director of Finance	92.5	71.30	5.93	4.15
Construction Supervisor	98.5	87.48	4.19	2.63
Computer Systems Analyst	100	74.16	5.13	2.33
Mechanical Engineer	100	76.37	5.72	2.64
Car Salesperson	100	79.45	3.34	5.24
Director of Security	100	80.87	4.31	3.57
Hardware Salesperson	100	80.95	2.94	3.09
Prison Guard	100	82.82	3.28	3.10
Tow Truck Driver	100	89.31	2.16	1.54

Note. D = Percentage that chose a male for the job (dichotomous choice); E = Estimated percentage of males in the population; S = Status; A = Importance of appearance.

Table 2

ANOVA Summary Table for Gender x Physical Attractiveness x Job Title

Source	df	F	η^2
Gender (G)	1	25.18***	0.11
G error	198		
Physical Attractiveness (P)	2	118.16***	0.54
P x G	2	0.52	0.01
P error	198		
Job Title (J)	4	0.002	0.00
J x G	4	35.39***	0.15
J x P	8	9.60***	0.09
J x G x P	8	10.10***	0.09
J error	792		

Note. *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 3

ANOVA Summary Table for “Corporate Sales Manager” Job Title

Source	df	F	η^2
Gender (G)	1	0.16	0.00
Physical Attractiveness (P)	2	87.45***	0.47
P x G	2	0.68	0.01
Error	198		

Note. *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 4

ANOVA Summary Table for “Counselor for Abused Children” Job Title

Source	df	F	η^2
Gender (G)	1	36.76***	0.16
Physical Attractiveness (P)	2	18.65***	0.16
P x G	2	0.66	0.01
Error	198		

Note. *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 5

ANOVA Summary Table for “Public Relations Officer” Job Title

Source	df	F	η^2
Gender (G)	1	4.91*	0.02
Physical Attractiveness (P)	2	38.68***	0.28
P x G	2	0.15	0.00
Error	198		

Note. * $p < 0.05$. *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 6

ANOVA Summary Table for “Executive Secretary” Job Title

Source	df	<u>F</u>	<u>η²</u>
Gender (G)	1	230.67***	0.54
Physical Attractiveness (P)	2	74.08***	0.43
P x G	2	15.93***	0.14
Error	198		

Note. *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 7

ANOVA Summary Table for “Director of Security” Job Title

Source	df	F	η^2
Gender (G)	1	15.93***	0.07
Physical Attractiveness (P)	2	21.64***	0.18
P x G	2	25.07***	0.20
Error	198		

Note. *** $p < 0.001$.

Figure 1. Mean employment suitability ratings as a function of physical attractiveness and job title.

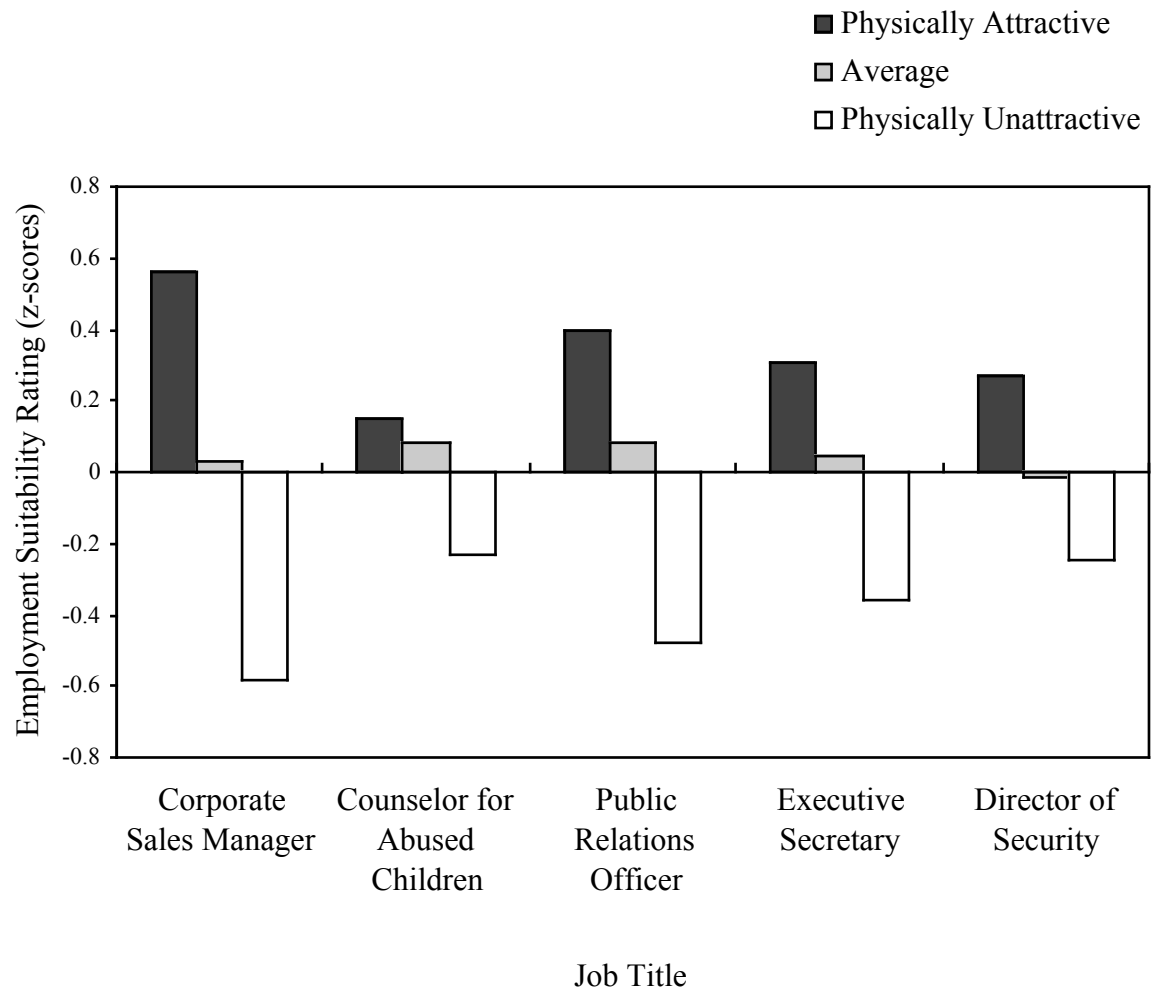


Figure 2. Mean employment suitability ratings for the job title “Executive Secretary” as a function of gender and physical attractiveness.

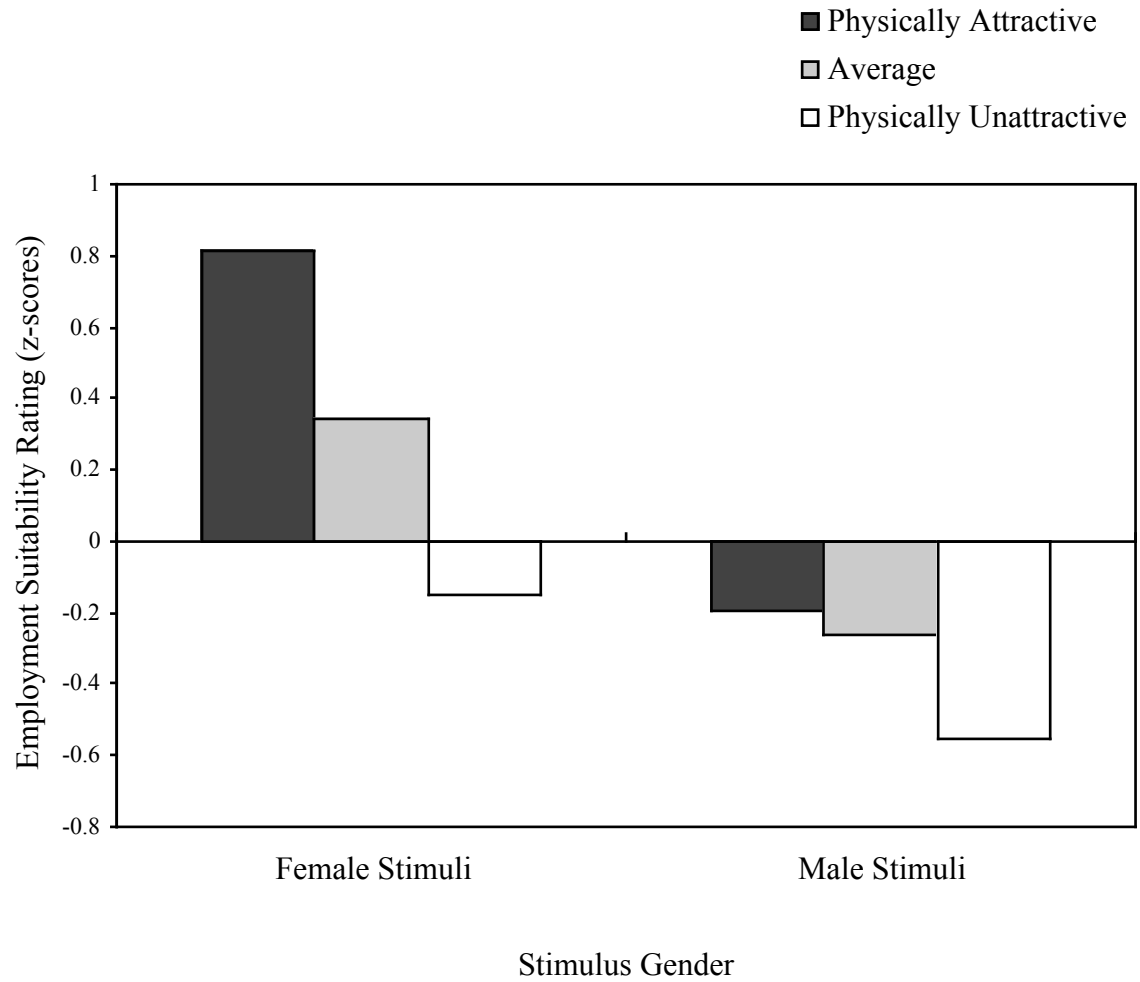


Figure 3. Mean employment suitability ratings for the job title “Director of Security” as a function of gender and physical attractiveness.

