More than Meets the Eye: Physical Attractiveness and Technology in Interpersonal Relationships

Yong Xiang Kho

Singapore Polytechnic

Author Note

As of 2015, Yong Xiang Kho is a student in Singapore Polytechnic's Diploma in Applied Drama and Psychology.

This research paper was part of an assignment for the First-Year module titled, Introduction to Social Psychology. Yong Xiang chose to research on the topic of interpersonal attraction.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Yong Xiang Kho. Email: yongxiangkho@gmail.com

PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS AND TECHNOLOGY IN RELATIONSHIPS

Abstract

This research paper reviews the literature that investigates the importance of physical attractiveness in interpersonal relationships as well as the use of technology. The paper acknowledges that the scope of research regarding physical attractiveness as well as common issues of trust and behaviours that could spur or inhibit the formation of interpersonal relationships via the use of technology. The research paper proceeds to evaluate the literature and providing insights about: recognising the call for the standardisation in the presentation of models; research in more integrated forms of physical attractiveness and other physical attractiveness cues; and taking into account the modern pervasiveness of telecommunication and advancements in technology. The paper concludes by advising researchers to exercise caution while clarifying grey areas of research.

Keywords: physical attractiveness, technology, interpersonal relationships

More than Meets the Eye: Physical Attractiveness and Technology in Interpersonal Relationships

Interpersonal relationships, ties we form with other people, are an everyday sight and we are usually part of them. Interpersonal relationships are available to many of us as friends, classmates or acquaintances. According to the Singapore Department of Statistics (2013), the total number of marriages in Singapore in 2012 was 27, 936. This is a significant increase from 24, 596 – the total number of marriages in Singapore 5 years ago in 2008. That is a total of 3, 340 couples willingly dedicating themselves to one another for the rest of their lives, the epitome of an interpersonal relationship.

What is the cause for interpersonal attraction? Research suggests that the effect of likability dominates over the factor of competency in forming an interpersonal relationship with another (Singh & Tor, 2008). However, isn't likability subjective? Do our looks, the visual cue we present to others as we approach another matter? How would that explain interpersonal relationships formed via computer mediated mediums where visual cues are not readily available?

Physical Attractiveness

The research literature over the years has unanimously shown that physical attractiveness plays a role in the formation of interpersonal relationships. This was supported in research by Leck (2006) where a participant's self-perceived physical attractiveness and the rating by the judges positively correlated to the number of dates in their lifetime, an activity one would relate to interpersonal relationships. This was echoed in subsequent research by Currie and Little (2009). Participants either rated the models – participants that had their pictures taken to be judged – in the context for long term relationships or short term relationships. Lower ratings yielded in the group that rated in the context for longer relationships suggest that people were more stringent when considering a long term partner. This implies that people indeed place a huge value on physical attractiveness.

In a self-report survey conducted by Demarest and Allen (2000), it was found that the participants had mistaken the figures that appealed to the opposite gender – males thinking that women preferred bulkier shapes and women thinking that men preferred thinner figures. This

disparity could be a reason to why the research is driven to find a universal physical attractiveness which appears to have many contributing factors.

Cross-Cultural Studies on Physical Attractiveness

Cross-cultural studies done on both male and female physical attractiveness suggests that social cultural factors play a role in determining what is physically attractive. In a study (Swami et al., 2007) conducted on Greek and British females, asking them to rate what they preferred in a physically attractive man. Greek women were found to judge male models with a more V-shaped body – wider shoulders than chest – as more physically attractive in compared to British women. Conversely, Greek women were found to also prefer a lower BMI, otherwise known as Body Mass Index, a measure in which weight is scaled for height (Swami & Tovée, 2005).

The social cultural difference was also observed in a cross cultural study by Swami, Jones, Einon and Furnham (2009). South African men and British men were asked to rate on a 9-point attractiveness scale of figures that differed in Waist-to-Hip Ratio (WHR), breast size (large or small) and ethnicity (black or white). It was found that all the men preferred a high WHR for both black and white figures. Yet, they differed in the attractiveness ratings for the apparent ethnicity of the figures and their respective breast size – South African men preferred large breasts in the black figures and small breasts in the white figures while British men preferred small breasts in the black figures and large breasts in the white figures.

Such difference may not be seen as surprising especially since people were found to rate physical attractiveness of people differently based on different location within a local context (such as: gym and movie theatre) (Jonason, 2009). However, researchers, Swami et al. (2009), had moved on to suggest that the cultural background of the model, the participant being rated, may affect what people might deem as physically attractive.

Alternatively, cross-cultural research done by Swami and Tovée (2005) has suggested instead that a person's social economic status (SES) as a reason behind the disparity of physical attractiveness. In the study, participants were taken from five different SES backgrounds – British participants,

Malaysian participants who were based in Britain and finally, Malaysians from industrialised Kuala Lumpur, semi-industrialised Kota Kinabalu and the rural outskirts of Kota Kinabula. It was found that participants from the rural setting preferred female figures that had a higher BMI.

Evaluation of Physical Attractiveness Literature

Research methodology.

It is a prerequisite in an accurate study of physical attractiveness that participants are presented with models to compare which they find most appealing to them. Within the handful of research used in this literature review, differences to which these models are presented exist. Both studies by Demarest and Allen (2000) and Swami et al. (2009) used line figures. While studies conducted by Swami et al. (2007), Foster (2008) and Swami and Tovée (2005) used pictures of real-life people. However, the pictures used within Swami and Tovée's study in 2005 were taken from a video of women in a set pose at a fixed distance. Even though, pictures from real-life people are indeed more realistic in compared to line figures, it is possible that they may not be as accurate as in a naturalistic setting due to the missing dimension.

Hence, it would lead to Leck (2006) study to stand out amongst this body of research. In the study, models were being videotaped in an interview. Judges rated based on the videotape. With the increased availability of technology, video clips should progressively be used in experiments to provide a more accurate rating in a study. Going forward, such a practice should be standardised across the body of research. This is so that studies can be compared without the medium in which the models are presented being a potential confounding variable.

In addition, it may appear that there is a lack in research in a more integrated form of physical attractiveness. This was suggested in the evaluation by Swami and Tovée (2005). Agreeably, in all three researches that used photographic materials of real-life persons' figures, their faces had been obscured (Swami & Tovée, 2005; Swami et al., 2007). This was also seen in Foster (2008) research when studying facial attractiveness; opaque tape had been applied such that the picture from chin down and hairline up were obscured. This is indeed one area in which researchers may investigate to

improve the validity of findings. After all, in a naturalistic setting, both face and figure will be observed simultaneously.

Research scope.

That being said, call for research by Swami et al. (2007) about the expansion in the field of acutely defining the ideal male physical attractiveness should also be acknowledged too. Even though, Swami et al. (2007) had called for research to be done to clarify the area of musculature that would lead to higher ratings of physical attractiveness, a potential bulk of research could also be conducted on other possible factors such as the face. Yet, in the end, more research needs to be done on the integrated physical attractiveness of face, figure and a combination of both face and figure in both genders.

Finally, research defining what physical attractiveness is has to be expanded. Foster's study in 2008 could arguably be one of the more unique pieces of literature. It investigated if olfactory cues, cues from the sense of smell, might affect physical attractiveness in addition to visual cues. Though it was found that visual cues were more strongly correlated to overall attractiveness, this study reminds us that there could be more than visual cues that affect physical attractiveness.

Technology and Relationships

A considerable amount of research suggests that relationships formed via technology, otherwise known as Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), is not satisfactory. Surveyed undergraduate students were also found to believe that those finding relationships online must be desperate (Donn & Sherman, 2002). Scott, Mottarella and Lavooy (2006) found that individuals who pursued computer-mediated relationships, also known as virtual relators, had lower intimacy in such relationships in compared to those who only had face-to-face relationships.

Secondly, concerns of trust – of the person they were communicating with lying about themselves – have also been mentioned throughout the literature (Donn & Sherman, 2002). In some

cases, participants have admitted to lying about their identities online (Whitty & Gavin, 2001; McCown, Fischer, Page and Homant, 2001).

More recently, a study by Elphinston and Noller (2011) suggests that in addition for online communications to not be ideal ways of forming relationships, it may be associated with lowering relationship satisfaction. It was found that Facebook, a social networking site, provided an environment that promotes jealousy-related feelings and behaviours.

Even though, all of the above mentioned cons suggest that relationships derived from technology may not be ideal, many have reported as successfully forming interpersonal relationships (Whitty & Gavin, 2001; McCown et al., 2001).

A study by Antheunis, Valkenburg and Peter (2007) suggests that in compared to Face-to-Face communication, text-only CMC induced both parties to engage in direct questioning and more self-disclosure. Both of which were considered to lead to enhanced interpersonal attraction.

Moreover, it may appear that many of the individual perceptions on the formation of interpersonal relationships via CMC are subjective. Both Internet Affinity – the attachment one grants to the form of media – and the amount of time spent on the internet were found to be positively correlated to better perceptions of online relationships (Anderson, 2005). Scott et al. (2006) found that even though virtual relators had lower intimacy in their online relationships, it was found to be relatively higher than the intimacy they had in their own Face-to-Face relationships.

Regarding the issue of trust, research shows that people are well aware of the dangers.

One precaution, paradoxically, is for participants to lie in return as precaution. In the study by McCown et al. (2001), 63.3% of the 30 participants admitted to lying online. However, Whitty and Gavin (2001) suggests that it is not all doom and gloom on the issue of lying in online relationships. In many of the interviews carried out, many men have admitted that lying online made it a more liberating medium. One participant (Whitty & Gavin, 2001, p. 629) is quoted as saying, "You also lose your ability to judge people's honesty effectively… there's a certain advantage to it. You lose

your inhibitions, your insecurities." Thus, as suggested by Whitty and Gavin (2001), it may not signify deception but perhaps a desire to reveal more about oneself. This greater self-disclosure may lead to better interpersonal relations as suggested by Antheunis et al. (2007).

Whitty and Gavin (2001) also suggested that the different channels used to communicate may also indicate an increasing amount of trust both parties have with each other. This is further supported by the study done by McCown et al. (2001) where one third of the participants had reported making contact offline. 83% of which had eventually met the other party in person. That is, however, not without first communicating with the other party via telephone; No one had met someone in person without first talking on the phone.

Evaluation of Technology in Interpersonal Relationship Literature

Advancing technology.

The body of research on the formation of interpersonal relationships with the use of technology has become quite limited. The scope of the research has been greatly narrowed in the process of finding reasons that lead to an individual forming interpersonal relationships online and the quality of such interpersonal relationships. As such, the body of research is significantly reduced once again as technology advances and much of the research gradually, albeit arguably, become invalidated.

Teenagers and young adults may no longer be using chat rooms which many of the research has been based upon. Newer technologies bring along communication in the form of phone applications to access social networking sites that were non-existent before. Previous research on the processes of forming interpersonal relationships may be replicated but modified such that it explores modern technology of today, from simple animated facial expressions to six second video clips to video calls on Skype. Focusing on the newer forms of CMC could easily form an independent branch of research.

Conversely, Elphinston and Noller (2011) suggests another effective way of combatting the narrowing scope, focus on the population that had grown up with advanced technology. This proves

effective as it would not take long to realise the pervasiveness of technology in everyday life. As of June 2013, there were 10, 761, 000 Broadband subscriptions in Singapore's population of 5, 312, 400 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2013), the number of Broadband subscriptions, with access to the internet being more than twice to that of the population.

Increased pervasiveness of telecommunication in tandem with the advancement of technology would affect the way that interpersonal relationships are formed. This is definitely an area in which research can be done. Are the interpersonal relationships formed with greater, equal or lesser intimacy than in the past? Does the newer technology substitute the need to interact with another person in the flesh?

Indeed, with the creative ways in which the younger generations are using technology, research may be done in the notably, newer phenomenon of people relying on such technology to maintain interpersonal relationships that started from Face-to-Face communication.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research on physical attractiveness and the use of technology in the formation of interpersonal relationships leaves much to be explored.

Even though the research literature appears to be unanimous about physical attractiveness' role in interpersonal relationships, other factors such as culture, perception and location are to be recognised as are concerns about the research methodology in physical attractiveness studies and in the research scope of physical attractiveness. Literature on the use of technology has been rather conflicted. However, the literature has proven insightful about the issues of trust and intimacy. The research in this branch needs to be expanded in order to keep up with the technology advancements and possible cohort differences.

As one ventures into unchartered territories of research which had been mentioned in the evaluations of current research, one should not forget to rethink and replicate the pilot studies that

founded some of the initial, novel implications. Neither should one neglect areas of interests mentioned in earlier research.

Hopefully, such research would be carried out to paint a clearer picture of the influences of physical attractiveness and the use of technology in the formation of interpersonal relationships.

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