

Effects of Sexual Attitudes and Physical Attractiveness on Person Perception of Men and Women

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A sample of 180 males and 180 females completed person perception measures for stimulus women who varied in physical attractiveness and permissiveness of sexual attitudes. The results indicated that both physical attractiveness and sexual attitudes had strong effects on person perception. Physically attractive stimulus women were rated higher than the unattractive stimulus women on a physical appeal factor and an item measuring interpersonal attraction. The sexually conservative women were rated higher on an evaluative factor, lower on a personability factor, and higher on the interpersonal attraction item than the sexually permissive stimulus women. It was also found that the effects of physical attractiveness were greater for males than for females and that women rated the sexually permissive stimulus women less favorably than did men.

Much has been written in the past decade or so about the sexual revolution. One aspect of the so-called sexual revolution is the reduction of the double standard. While the sexuality of man has been recognized for some time, it was not too many years ago that "good" women were expected to have little interest in sex except within the confines of marriage, and even then many women were reluctant to appear too enthusiastic about it. Recent data indicate that the double standard has undergone some modification. Hunt (1974), in his summary of a survey of sexual attitudes and behavior, reported that for men between the ages of 18 and 24, 86% considered

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premarital intercourse acceptable for men and 80% considered it acceptable for women if strong affection for the partner existed. Not only does this indicate that the difference in standards of appropriate behavior for men and women is relatively small, it also indicates a general change in attitudes regarding sexual behavior. A Roper Agency survey conducted in 1937 and again in 1959 found that on both occasions only 22% of those surveyed believed it permissible for both men and women to have premarital experiences, while an additional 8% believed that it was permissible for men, but not for women (Wheeler, 1967).

The primary purpose of the present study was to determine how men and women perceived stimulus women that have varied sexual attitudes. The subjects in this study were asked to rate stimulus women on a number of characteristics. It was thought that this approach might be of interest because the results might not be consistent with beliefs about the "sexual revolution." It is well known that attitudes and behavior are not always consistent, and it was thought that while a majority of young adults currently approve of premarital intercourse, they may not necessarily evaluate stimulus women who are portrayed as being sexually active favorably. Since Hunt's sample was subdivided into various age groups, it is possible to make comparisons within the same age range. The majority of subjects in the present study fell within the age range of 18 to 24.

Possible sex differences were also a major concern. Hunt reported that while 80% of men approved of women having premarital experience, only 50% of women approved. This would suggest that the male subjects in this study would evaluate sexually permissive stimulus women more favorably than would female subjects.

An additional independent variable included in this study was physical attractiveness. Because sexual warmth and responsiveness have been found to be part of the physical attractiveness stereotype (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972), and physical attractiveness plays an important role in romantic and sexual attraction (see Berscheid & Walster, 1974), it was predicted that attractive stimulus women would be evaluated more favorably than unattractive women when both were portrayed as having sexually permissive attitudes. Also, on the basis of previous research (Miller, 1970), it was predicted that the effects of physical attractiveness would be greater for males than for females.

To summarize, this investigation examined the effects of three independent variables—(a) sex of subject, (b) sexual attitudes, and (c) physical attractiveness—upon person perception and interpersonal attraction.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 180 undergraduate men and 180 undergraduate women. They were enrolled either in a study skills class at a four-year university or introductory courses at a community college.

Procedure

The subjects were seen in groups ranging in size from 15 to 35. They were seen during a regularly scheduled class and were requested to complete the experiment as favor to the experimenter. Each class was given a folder containing an "autobiographical sketch" and a rating form. Two-thirds of the folders of males and females also contained a photograph. The subjects were told that the experiment was intended to study the accuracy of first impressions based upon a limited amount of information. The subjects were asked to look at the photograph (if appropriate), read the autobiographical sketch, and complete the person-perception rating form. After the subjects completed the materials, they were debriefed and their questions were answered.

The experiment was a 2 X 3 X 3 factorial design. The first factor was sex of subjects. The second factor was physical attractiveness of the stimulus women. The three levels included attractive women, unattractive women, and no-picture control condition. The third factor, sexual attitude of the stimulus women, included a sexually permissive condition, a sexually restrictive condition, and a sexually neutral condition. This resulted in 18 cells, with 20 subjects in each cell.

Materials

Physical Attractiveness. The photographs were taken from a set of 50 previously rated by 37 college students on a 9-point scale of physical attractiveness. Two attractive ($M = 7.69$, $SD = 1.14$) and two unattractive ($M = 2.30$, $SD = 1.17$) 3" X 5" black-and-white photographs were selected for use in this study. Neither the difference between the two attractive nor the two unattractive photographs approached significance.

Sexual Attitudes. Short "autobiographical" sketches were written to portray either a sexually permissive, restricted, or neutral attitude. These

sketches were rated by 32 college students on a 9-point scale for sexual permissiveness. Two sketches at each level were used. The combined ratings for the three conditions were $M = 7.19$, $SD = 1.11$; $M = 2.31$, $SD = 1.07$; $M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.21$; respectively. The difference between the stories in each condition in no case approached significance. The sketches in each condition are given below:

The most pleasant thing about ODU is the sexually liberated attitude that everyone seems to have. I slept with six different guys last year and there were no problems at all. Nobody seems to have any hang-ups about it. After all, if you're attracted to someone, why shouldn't you have sex with him. All my girlfriends seem to feel pretty much the same way. I'm really looking forward to this next year. I've already met several guys that I'm attracted to, and I'm anxious to develop relationships with them (sexually permissive).

Coming to college has given me the chance to get out from under my parents' wing and experience life. Before, my parents kept me on a tight rein and watched whoever I went out with. Now I can spend the night with any man I please and not have to worry about being caught. I don't have to sneak around trying to satisfy my desires—I can be out in front with them now (sexually permissive).

I've had a very favorable reaction to ODU. I was somewhat worried about going to college because I've heard that college kids are pretty sexually permissive, but that hasn't been my experience. All the guys I've gone out with have respected me, and all my girlfriends are also waiting for the right person to come along before having a sexual relationship. Most of the kids I have met have pretty high moral standards and I really appreciate that (sexually restricted).

The best thing about ODU are the students. The ones I know are interested in a lot of things and they don't always have sex on their minds. A couple of my girlfriends are having sex with their boyfriends, but they plan to get married eventually. The boys I've gone out with have all been very nice, and no one has tried to push sex on me. I might be willing to have sex eventually, but only with someone I plan to marry (sexually restricted).

College life for me has been very rewarding so far. The wide variety of subjects covered in classes and the number of people I have met has kept me interested and informed me as never before. I feel like college has given me the chance to become aware of what I want out of life. I am really looking forward to my next two years in school (sexually neutral).

I really like the kids I've met at ODU. Not only are most of them pretty responsible about their studies, but they're all a lot of fun to be with. In the dorm, I can always find someone to do something with, and lots of times a group of people will get together. I have more friends now than I've ever had before. I really enjoying going to school here (sexually neutral).

Each of the "autobiographical" sketches was paired with each of the photographs of the stimulus women an equal number of times. Five men and five women rated each photograph-sketch pair.

Person-Perception Measure. The dependent measure consisted of 25 items arranged in a 7-point semantic differential format, and one item regarding interpersonal attraction. The 25 items and their serial position in the list can be found in Table I. The last item asked how interested the subject would be in having this person for a friend. The answer was arranged in a 7-point format and ranged from "extremely uninterested" to "extremely interested."

RESULTS

In order to present the results in a parsimonious fashion, the 25 semantic differential items were factor analyzed. A principal factor analysis with varimax rotation yielded three significant factors with eigenvalues greater than 1. These three factors accounted for 95.0% of the variance. The items and their factor loadings can be found in Table I. Based upon the 3 items with the highest loadings on Factor I (items 2, 4, and 14), this factor was labeled evaluation. Items 8, 24, and 25 loaded highly on the second factor and suggested the label physical appeal. The third factor was labeled personability, based on the high loadings of items 12, 20, and 21. A composite weighted score for each factor for each subject was obtained by summing the product of the factor-score coefficient matrix (defined as the product of the factor-structure matrix times the correlation matrix) and the vector of standardized values of each item across the 25 items. Analyses of variance were performed on the three factor scores, and on the item pertaining to interpersonal attraction.

Table I. Factor Loadings for Person Perception^a

Item	Factor		
	I	II	III
14. responsible-irresponsible	<i>.800</i>	-.004	-.051
4. moral-immoral	<i>.771</i>	-.011	-.111
2. good-bad	<i>.754</i>	.124	.029
5. mature-immature	<i>.750</i>	.078	.177
11. adjusted-maladjusted	<i>.666</i>	.205	.243
3. neurotic-normal	-.635	-.127	-.201
1. passive-aggressive	<i>.578</i>	-.094	-.237
10. intelligent-dull	<i>.571</i>	.248	.308
22. secure-insecure	<i>.560</i>	.223	.236
19. liberal-conservative	-.530	.153	.417
13. modest-immodest	<i>.512</i>	.051	.006
7. traditional-frigid	<i>.368</i>	.051	.006
24. pretty-homely	.104	<i>.938</i>	.099
8. attractive-unattractive	.110	<i>.891</i>	.071
25. desirable-undesirable	.248	<i>.754</i>	.250
23. popular-unpopular	.077	<i>.621</i>	.431
20. friendly-unfriendly	.166	.211	<i>.747</i>
21. likable-unlikable	.484	.335	<i>.602</i>
12. warm-cold	.224	.199	<i>.570</i>
9. outgoing-shy	-.287	.301	<i>.470</i>
15. narrow minded—open minded	.069	-.049	-.469
18. romantic—hardhearted	.023	.362	.380
6. promiscuous-liberated	.084	.007	-.293
16. individualistic-conforming	.083	.008	.066
17. domineering-submissive	-.033	.093	.007
Eigenvalue	6.502	4.201	1.408
Percent of variance	51.000	33.000	11.000

^aItalics indicate a significant loading on the corresponding factor.

Evaluation

The analysis of variance upon the first factor scores, evaluation, resulted in main effects for physical attractiveness, $F(2, 342) = 8.41, p < .001$, and sexual attitude, $F(2, 342) = 189.74, p < .001$. The variable of sexual attitude accounted for substantially more variance ($\eta^2 = .49$) than did physical attractiveness ($\eta^2 = .02$). The main effect for physical attractiveness was a result of the physically attractive women having been rated the most positively ($M = 1.16$), the no-picture control women having been rated the least favorably ($M = -2.14$), and the unattractive women falling between these two conditions ($M = .71$). Individual means comparisons (Winer, 1962) revealed no significant difference between the attractive and unattractive conditions, while both of these conditions were significantly different from the no-picture control condition (both $ps < .001$). The main effect for sexual attitude was a result of unfavorable evaluation of the sexually permissive stimulus women ($M = -9.81$), while the sexually restricted and neutral women were rated favorably ($M = 4.81$ and 4.82 , respectively). The latter two conditions were both significantly different from the permissive conditions ($ps < .001$). The mean scores for this factor can be found in Table II.

A significant sex of subject X sexual attitude interaction, $F(2, 342) = 7.05, p < .005$, was found for Factor I. Both males and females rated the permissive stimulus women significantly less favorably than either the restricted or neutral stimulus women (all $ps < .001$). The interaction effect was a result of the females rating the permissive stimulus women less favorably ($M = -12.17$) than did the males ($M = -7.46, p < .001$).

Table II. Mean Scores for Evaluation, Factor I^a

Sex	Sexual attitude	Photograph		
		Attractive	Unattractive	No picture
Males	Permissive	-5.68	-6.04	-10.66
	Restricted	7.58	5.04	1.33
	Neutral	4.50	4.83	3.50
Females	Permissive	-10.78	-12.56	-13.17
	Restricted	4.77	7.86	2.29
	Neutral	6.58	5.11	4.43

^aTo facilitate presentation of the results, all scores were multiplied by a constant of -10.

Physical Appeal

The analysis of variance on the second factor scores, physical appeal, resulted in a main effect for physical attractiveness only $F(2, 342) = 429.01$, $p < .001$. The proportion of variance accounted for by this variable was quite sizable ($\eta^2 = .70$). The main effect was a result of the attractive stimulus women being rated the most favorably ($M = 9.06$), the unattractive women being rated the least favorably ($M = -10.76$), and the no-picture women falling between these two conditions ($M = 1.36$). All three individual means comparisons were highly significant ($ps < .001$).

A significant interaction effect between sex of subject and physical attractiveness, $F(2, 342) = 5.72$, $p < .005$, was obtained. This was a result of a difference between men and women in their ratings of the unattractive women and the no-picture women. While both sexes rated the attractive women highly favorably ($M_s = 9.07$ and 9.06 for males and females, respectively), males rated the unattractive women less favorably ($M = -12.21$) than did females ($M = 9.32$, $p < .025$). Also, males rated the no-picture women more favorably ($M = 2.52$) than did the females ($M = .19$, $p < .025$). The mean scores for this factor can be found in Table III.

Personability

Analysis of variance for the third factor scores, likability, resulted in main effects for physical attractiveness, $F(2, 342) = 3.53$, $p < .05$, and for sexual attitude, $F(2, 342) = 27.23$, $p < .001$. The proportion of variance accounted for by attitudes ($\eta^2 = .13$) was somewhat larger than accounted for by attractiveness ($\eta^2 = .02$). The main effect for attractiveness resulted from the unattractive stimulus women being rated as

Table III. Mean Scores for Physical Appeal, Factor II^a

Sex	Sexual attitude	Photograph		
		Attractive	Unattractive	No picture
Males	Permissive	8.32	-9.44	3.64
	Restricted	9.57	-12.20	2.10
	Neutral	9.31	-15.00	1.83
Females	Permissive	9.68	-10.08	0.54
	Restricted	9.68	-9.49	0.50
	Neutral	7.81	-8.38	-0.46

^aAll scores were multiplied by -10.

Table IV. Mean Scores for Personability, Factor III^a

Sex	Sexual attitude	Photograph		
		Attractive	Unattractive	No picture
Males	Permissive	4.33	3.18	2.88
	Restricted	-1.10	-1.98	-7.79
	Neutral	1.36	1.30	2.44
Females	Permissive	2.38	3.82	0.84
	Restricted	-7.38	-1.33	-7.52
	Neutral	2.12	2.08	-0.46

^aAll scores were multiplied by -10.

more personable ($M = 1.18$) than the no-picture women ($M = -1.60$, $p < .05$). The attractive women ($M = .28$) did not significantly differ from the other two groups. The main effect for attitudes resulted from the permissive and neutral women being rated as more personable ($M_s = 2.90$ and 1.47 , respectively) than the restricted women ($M = -4.52$, $p_s < .001$). The difference between the permissive and neutral conditions was not significant. There were no significant interaction effects. The mean scores for this factor can be found in Table IV.

Interpersonal Attraction

The last item requested the subjects to rate how interested they would be in having the stimulus woman for a friend. Eleven subjects did not respond to this item. Analysis of variance indicated main effects for sex of subject, $F(1, 331) = 5.44$, $p < .025$; for physical attractiveness, $F(2, 331) = 32.74$, $p < .001$; and for sexual attitude, $F(2, 331) = 8.57$, $p < .001$. The proportion of variance accounted for by attractiveness ($\eta^2 = .14$) was somewhat larger than by attitude ($\eta^2 = .04$). The main effect for sex of subject resulted from males being more attracted to the stimulus women ($M = 4.65$) than females ($M = 4.25$). The main effect for attractiveness resulted from the attractive women being rated as the most desirable ($M = 5.14$), the unattractive women being rated as the least desirable ($M = 3.79$), and the no-picture women falling between these two ($M = 4.54$). All three individual means comparisons were highly significant ($p_s < .001$). The main effect for attitude resulted from the permissive women being rated as less desirable ($M = 4.10$) than either the restricted women ($M = 4.59$, $p < .005$) or the neutral women ($M = 4.76$, $p < .001$). There was no significant difference between the latter two conditions.

The only significant interaction effect obtained was between sex of subject and physical attractiveness, $F(2, 331) = 10.20$, $p < .001$. This

Table V. Mean Scores for Interpersonal Attraction

Sex	Sexual attitude	Photograph		
		Attractive	Unattractive	No picture
Males	Permissive	5.45	3.40	4.50
	Restricted	5.95	3.32	4.65
	Neutral	5.55	3.35	4.95
Female	Permissive	4.18	3.32	3.65
	Restricted	4.78	4.25	4.40
	Neutral	4.80	4.45	5.00

resulted from males having greater differences across the attractive, unattractive, and no-picture conditions ($M_s = 5.65, 3.55,$ and $4.71,$ respectively; all $ps < .001$) than the females. For females the corresponding means were $4.60, 4.02,$ and $4.37.$ While these differences were in the same direction as the differences for the males, none of the female comparisons were significant. The mean scores for this item can be found in Table V.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study were consistent with the hypotheses in several respects. First, the sexually permissive stimulus women received the lowest ratings on the evaluation factor and on the item dealing with interpersonal attraction. While this seems to indicate that neither men nor women are ready to accept women who are sexually permissive, the results are not necessarily inconsistent with increased acceptance of premarital sex. Based upon the comments made by several subjects during the debriefing, the sexually permissive and restrictive sketches may have been perceived as representing the extreme end points of a continuum. the sexually permissive women tended to be categorized as promiscuous, while the restricted women were labeled "professional virgins" by several subjects. Perhaps, if more moderate examples of sexual attitudes had been used, the sexually inactive women would not have been rated the most favorably.

Somewhat perplexing was the apparent inconsistency between the results for the first and third factors. While the sexually permissive stimulus women received the lowest scores on the evaluation factor, they received the highest scores on the personability factor. This indicates that while these stimulus women were rated as being bad, immoral, and irresponsible, they were also rated as being warm, friendly, and likable. One possible explanation for this apparent contradiction is that the sexually permissive stimulus women were perceived as being highly successful in attracting men

and thus were perceived as being more personable. However, it could be that the subjects disapproved of using sex as a means of appearing warm, friendly, and likable. That is, when presented with such extremes, the subjects may have concluded that it would be better to be somewhat less friendly and more moral. Of course, there are many other possible explanations, and additional research would be necessary to understand this inconsistency.

The sex of subject X sexual attitude interaction on the evaluation factor was of major interest. While both males and females rated the permissive stimulus women less favorably than the restricted stimulus women, the females rated the permissive stimulus women significantly less favorably than did the males. This suggests, and is consistent with Hunt's data, that women are somewhat harsher in their evaluations of sexually active women than are men. Thus, the double standard may still be alive in the minds of women. It would be of interest to make comparisons between sexually permissive stimulus women and stimulus men, to determine if sexual permissiveness is perceived as being more acceptable in men than in women. It would also be interesting to determine if sex differences exist in other regions of the country or if these findings are specific to the South. Comparisons between the data presented here and the data presented by Hunt must be made cautiously. Hunt's sample was intended to be representative of the national population, while no such attempt was made here. It is likely that college students differ from the general population in several important ways.

The predicted sex of subject X physical attractiveness interaction also was supported. The effects of physical attractiveness were stronger for males than females on factor II, physical appeal, and on the interpersonal attraction item. These findings are in accord with previous research findings that suggest the physical attractiveness stereotype is stronger for males than for females.

One hypothesis that received no support was the prediction that for the sexually permissive stimulus women, those who were attractive would be evaluated more favorably than those who were unattractive. While there were strong main effects for both variables, there were no significant sexual attitudes X physical attractiveness interactions. This failure to obtain an interaction is consistent with previous research that manipulated physical attractiveness and attitudes of stimulus individuals. For example, Byrne, London, and Reeves (1968) manipulated the attractiveness and attitudes about a variety of topics (e.g., religion, politics) of a confederate to investigate their contributions to interpersonal attractions. Like the present study, Byrne et al. obtained main effects for each variable, but no interaction. However, as Berscheid and Walster (1974) point out, it seems reasonable that attractiveness and attitudes have a mutual influence,

however difficult it is to discern. Perhaps if more subtle distinctions between the attitudes and attractiveness of stimulus women were used, interaction effects would be obtained.

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