



Are we less beautiful than we think? Illusion about self-physical attractiveness

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Significance: Individual perceived self-attractiveness is one of the most widely studied constructs in fashion consumer behavior study. A great deal of research has examined self-evaluation of physical attractiveness in relation to diverse explicit measures from one's appearance management behavior (e.g. dieting, surgical procedures, and apparel selection) to upward social comparison. However, it was relatively recent that researchers have paid their attention to "how" people perceive their own physical attractiveness and underlying mechanism of self-attractiveness perception. The aim of the current study is to explore how judgment of the physical attractiveness of self could be distorted in regard of both facial and body image.

Theoretical Background: Epley and Whitchurch(2008) suggested that people recognize their own faces as being more physically attractive than they actually are. Empirical studies regarding women's body image in general, however, show contradicting results. In particular, women tend to show consistent dissatisfaction with their body image and may even hold negatively distorted perceptions of their own bodies (Powell, Matacin, & Stuart, 2001). The resolution would come from the idea that facial attractiveness and body attractiveness are two distinct factors leading to different self-evaluation process. Recent study done by Ann, Choo and Lee (2011) reported that people tend to hold relatively objective body perception of their own due to the availability of obvious cues with respect to the body size. Therefore, it can be assumed that people's perception of their facial attractiveness and body attractiveness would be distorted in different ways. More specifically, people would have negative illusion of self in regard of their body image while they have positive illusion of their own facial image, and this inflated perception of self-facial image would be moderated by people's motivational states. The work of Balceties and Dunning(2006) confirmed motivational influence on person's visual perception, the basic idea of which is people see what they want to see. According to their empirical research that people's motivational states—their wishes and preference—influence their processing of visual stimuli, current study presumably assumed that self-enhancing bias in facial attractive perception would correlate with appearance orientation.

Research Method: While self-perceived physical attractiveness have been commonly measured through subjects' self-report, the present study adopted rather novel methodology developed by Epley and Whitchurch(2008). The researcher took pictures of participants and, using computerized procedure, produced more attractive and less attractive versions of pictures.

Participants were asked to identify the picture which is congruent to their own self-image. Before this selection task, participants were asked to complete the standard measure of appearance orientation, appearance self-esteem and global self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965).

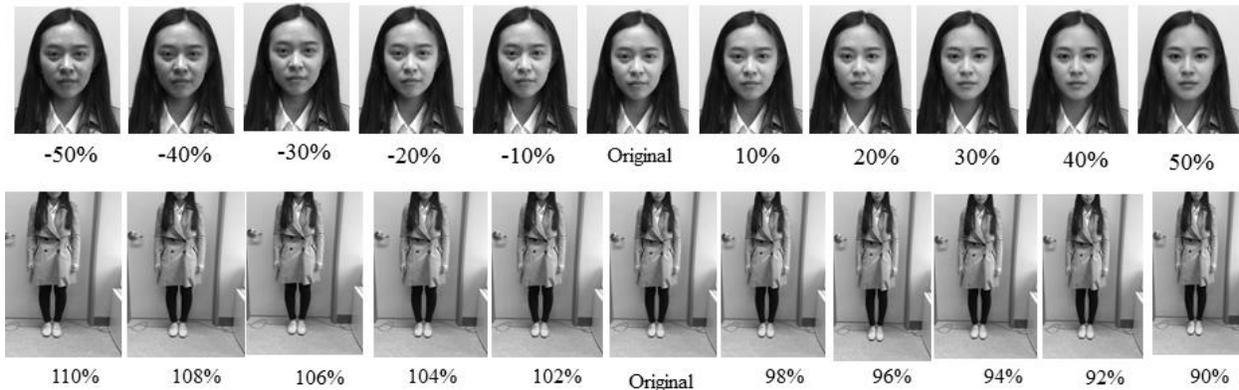


Figure 1. Example of the averaging procedure.

Results: As predicted, participants tended to select one of the faces morphed in more attractive way ($Mean=10.00$, $t(20)=3.77$, $p=.001$). Contrasting results was observable with respect to body image perception, that participants tended to select one of the body images morphed in less attractive way ($Mean=103.2$, $t(20)=2.67$, $p=.016$). In addition to confirm this different perception process regarding facial and body image, we correlated the attractive level participants recognized as themselves with three explicit measures; self-esteem, appearance self-esteem and appearance orientation in order to identify the source of this positive and negative bias in self-perception. Only appearance orientation appeared to be significantly correlated with self-enhancing bias in facial perception ($r(20)=.49$, $p=.02$), but neither self-esteem nor appearance self-esteem significantly correlated with the image participants recognized as their own. This results is consistent with research of Epley and Whitchurch(2008) that showed no significant correlation between self-enhancing bias and explicit measures of self-worth.

Discussion: The present experiment demonstrates that people tend to have inflated perception of their facial image while they show evidence of negative-self distortion in their body image recognition. The current research's finding is consistent with prior study results of Swann, Pelham and Krull (1989), that when people hold negative self-view, people tend to seek feedback which is consistent with their negative self-view rather than accepting self-enhancing feedback. One's own body image is more readily observable and objectively verifiable (e.g. body weight) than one's own facial image that it can hardly create positive illusion.