

6-2016

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Recommended Citation

Smith, Kelsey (2016) "The Impact of Appearance on Students' Opinions of Others," *Psychology Research Methods Journal*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 19 , Article 7.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/psych_journals/vol1/iss19/7

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The Impact of Appearance on Students' Opinions of Others

Kelsey Smith⁶

This study was conducted in order to test if people are able to correctly identify a person's sexual orientation based on seeing a photo alone. This study used 12 stimulus photos, 6 of men and 6 of women, to see if participants would be able to correctly assume the depicted individuals sexual orientation. I hypothesized that participants would not be able to properly identify an individual's sexual orientation based off of a photo alone. I also hypothesized that conservativeness would be positively correlated with an increased confidence score. My final hypothesis was that stimuli photos that featured individuals with unconventional appearances would be identified as not heterosexual. Unconventional appearances referred to multiple piercings, unnatural hair colors, and hair length. The study was conducted online through Qualtrics. Participants were recruited through Facebook, a social media website. Results found that individuals are able to identify an individual's sexual orientation better than chance alone. The results also found that conservativeness was not positively correlated with an increased confidence score. Finally, individuals who had unconventional appearances were more likely to be identified as not heterosexual.

There is little doubt that individuals who are considered part of a minority of a population face hardships that individuals in a majority do not face. Individuals of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual (LGBT) community have been discriminated against for many years. It is important to note that people are not only discriminated against for actually being a part of the LGBT community, but also when they are perceived to be a part of this community (Stern, West, Jost, & Rule, 2013). Espelage and Swearer (2008) found that 26% of boys in 9th through 11th grade were bullied by being called gay. Regardless of whether these boys were part of the

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LGBT community or not, these boys reported the highest levels of both physical and verbal aggression. The reason I chose this research project is because people are bullied for being “gay,” regardless of if they are really gay or not. I believe it is important to show that “gaydar,” a tool people like to use, as a reason to suspect an individual's sexual preference, is not always accurate.

I created this study because as someone who is a part of this community, I see the discrimination that is present every day. The words “you are so gay” and “that is so gay” are used as insults towards younger children, which are linked to psychological turmoil in young men and boys alike (Espelage & Swearer, 2008). The fact is that in these instances, being gay is being considered inherently bad. No junior high boy gets excited when his classmates call him a faggot, because it is not a socially desirable label. These labels can lead to many negative consequences for the individuals who are being targeted.

Espelage and Swearer (2008) found that homophobic rhetoric in schools leads to increased psychological distress and an increase in drug and alcohol use for LGBT students. It was found that 90% of LGBT students in an online study done by Harris Interactive & the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network [GLSEN], (2005) had been harassed or assaulted in the last year. Furthermore, this study found that LGBT students were three times as likely to feel unsafe in school compared to their non-LGBT counterparts (Harris Interactive & GLSEN as cited in Espelage & Swearer, 2008). Not only are LGBT students more prone to bullying and

harassment, they are also more prone to parental rejection and suicide as well (Wylie, Corliss, Boulanger, Prokop, & Austin, 2010). Wylie et al. (2010) found that not only do individuals suffer from psychological distress, they can suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety. These individuals can manifest these troubles into physical symptoms, such as headaches, dizziness, and vomiting. Studies have also show that transgender students are at a high risk of sexual assault; with between 10-69% of transgender respondents stating that they had been sexually assaulted because of their gender identity (as cited in Wylie et al., 2010). According to the American Civil Liberties Union (2017), 28 states in the United States have no nondiscrimination clause against individuals in the LGBT community getting fired from their job and being denied housing. These inequalities can be addressed when we are aware of our biases.

This leads to the development of my study. As the president of Lindenwood's Gay/Straight Alliance, it is important to me that, as a campus, LGBT students can coexist with non-LGBT students peacefully. This means addressing stereotypes and generalizations we make about people we see during our daily routine. Evans and Herriot (2004) found that as non-LGBT students develop supportive attitudes towards LGBT students, there is a more positive campus climate. As a place of learning, this is important because positive learning environments can lead to better academic success and help improve student's confidence to continue towards success and goal making (Li, 2012).

Sexual orientation is unique because it is perceptually ambiguous in comparison to things like race (Stern et al., 2013). Instead of using direct stimuli (such as skin pigmentation) to categorize a certain individual, we use indirect stimuli to categorize them. Indirect stimuli can be easier described as some stereotypical ideas reserved about gay individuals, such as being flamboyant, drama lovers, or using hand gestures. It was found that men who have more traditionally feminine features were more likely to be seen as part of the LGBT community (Stern et al., 2013). This has been shown in political ideologies; because multiple studies show that conservatives have greater inclination to be confident when faced with a decision-making task (Stern et al., 2013). Connecting this to perception of sexuality, those who consider themselves conservatives politically should then be more likely to make decisions based on stereotypes of gay men and women rather than assess all of the stimuli.

While not all individuals who are part of the LGBT community are what would be considered a stereotypical gay person, there are individuals who do submit to these stereotypes. Studies have found that sexual orientation can be correctly identified through video clips and vocal stimuli (Rule, Ambady, Adams, & Macrae, 2008). Because of this, it is important to know what features are the primary determinants of perception. Hair is considered the most distinguishing characteristic when it comes to the categorization of individuals (Rule, et al., 2008). This could be because hair is one of the easiest facial qualities to manipulate (compared to the nose or eyes, which would require extensive surgery to change). Rule et al. (2008) found

that many of the participants who were accurately choosing men's sexual orientation during a study had been guessing during the duration of the study, which means they were leaving it up to chance. This is important to note because while these guesses may have been correct, they were still assumptions, not factual driven conclusions.

My hypothesis is that individuals will not be able to correctly identify student's sexual orientation based on appearance alone. I also have a hypothesis that individuals who have a political leaning towards conservative ideology will be more confident in their answers than individuals who lean toward liberal ideology. My final hypothesis is that the pictures of individuals who have unconventional appearances for their perceived sex will be more likely to be selected as not heterosexual.

The survey was conducted online through Qualtrics. The survey consisted of 12 stimulus photos where participants had to identify sexual orientation as well as how confident they were in their answer. After answering these questions they were asked demographic questions, including their political leanings. Finally, the participants were asked if they knew anyone in the LGBT community. If they responded yes they were asked how that might have influenced their decisions; if they responded no they were asked how it might have not influenced their decisions.

Method

Participants

I had 17 participants. This sample was collected through Facebook. There were 7 male, 8 female, 1 who did not answer, and 1 non-binary participants. A majority, 13, of the participants were Caucasian; there was also 1 African-American participant, 1 Hispanic/Latino individual, 1 who did not answer, as well as 1 individual of mixed ethnicities. When asked how religious the participants would rate themselves, 31.25% responded as being probably not being religious and 25% reported themselves as may or may not being religious. A majority of the participants have attended Lindenwood for four years. There were 3 participants that had attended Lindenwood for two years, three years, and five years. Participants responded that they were more liberal (the mean being 24.64, where 1 is liberal and 100 is conservative.)

Materials and Procedure

Stimulus Photos. I asked individuals to be depicted in my survey. The stimulus photos (see Appendix A) were chosen from acquaintances from my high school, in Lake Forest, California; this way there was less of a chance that the participant had prior knowledge about the individuals in the stimulus photos. I sent these individuals a message through Facebook asking if they would be willing to be depicted in my upcoming research project (see Appendix B). Once the individual agreed to be part of the study I looked through his or her profile pictures on Facebook for the most recent photo that featured him or her alone, this way there was no

confusion about who the participant was being asked to judge. I chose 6 female and 6 male models, this way there would be an equal number of models from each gender. Two of the female models and two of the male models that were depicted had unconventional appearances, meaning they had multiple piercings or tattoos, unnaturally colored hair, or other physical appearances that did not conform to the main stream of society. Four of the female models and male models did not have unconventional appearances. Six of the pictured individuals reported being lesbian, gay, or bisexual; 6 of the pictured individuals reported being heterosexual. Using a variety of individuals ensured that one type of sexuality was not represented more than another, and using both male and female models ensured that real life conditions are simulated.

Online Survey. Once getting approval from all the individuals, I created my online survey on Qualtrics. The first item on this survey was an informed consent statement (see Appendix C), which participants had to agree to before they were able to take the survey. The first question block on the survey (see Appendix D) asked whether or not the participant is a Lindenwood student. If the participant was a Lindenwood student, they would be directed to answer the rest of the questions on the survey. If the participant was not a Lindenwood student, they would be sent to the debriefing statement (see Appendix E). Since this was an online survey, participants were able to take it in a multitude of settings. The participants were shown stimulus photos and selected what they believed the individual in the stimulus photos sexuality to be. They would then be directed to a Likert scale of how confident they were in their opinion.

By using a Likert scale to record confidence, it helped show if there were commonalities between participants and certain depicted individuals. This continued 11 times until the participant had seen all 12 photos. They were then given a short demographic survey (see Appendix F). In this demographic survey they were asked if they knew anyone that is part of the LGBT+ community. If they answered yes to this question, they were then directed to another series of questions asking whether or not they believed that knowing someone in the LGBT+ community influenced their decision making, and if so why. If they answered no they were then sent to answer demographic questions. After the participant had completed the survey they were directed to the debriefing statement and thanked for their participation.

Results

In order to test my first hypothesis I conducted a chi-square analysis. When measuring the correct identification of individuals it was found that participants were able to correctly identify the stimuli photos sexual orientation better than chance, $\chi^2_{(1)}=9.33$, $p<.005$. A correlational analysis was used in order to see if conservativeness was positively correlated with increased confidence in answers. This hypothesis was also not supported, $r_{(19)}= -.187$. For my final hypothesis I used a chi-squared analysis again. Individuals who were labeled as having unconventional appearances were more likely to be labeled as not heterosexual, $p < .005$, supporting my hypothesis.

Discussion

After conducting this survey I noticed that stimuli photos that were of women were identified incorrect more often than men. If I were to conduct this study again, I would be curious to see if there is a sex difference when it comes to being able to correctly identify a stimuli photos sexual orientation. One of the limitations of my study was that a majority of the participants were liberal. This made it hard to test if conservativeness affected confidence, because no one identified as conservative. Finally, the results to this survey are limited because there was a small sample size. If I were to conduct this again I would consider going through the Lindenwood Participant Pool, as well as reaching out to other local universities.

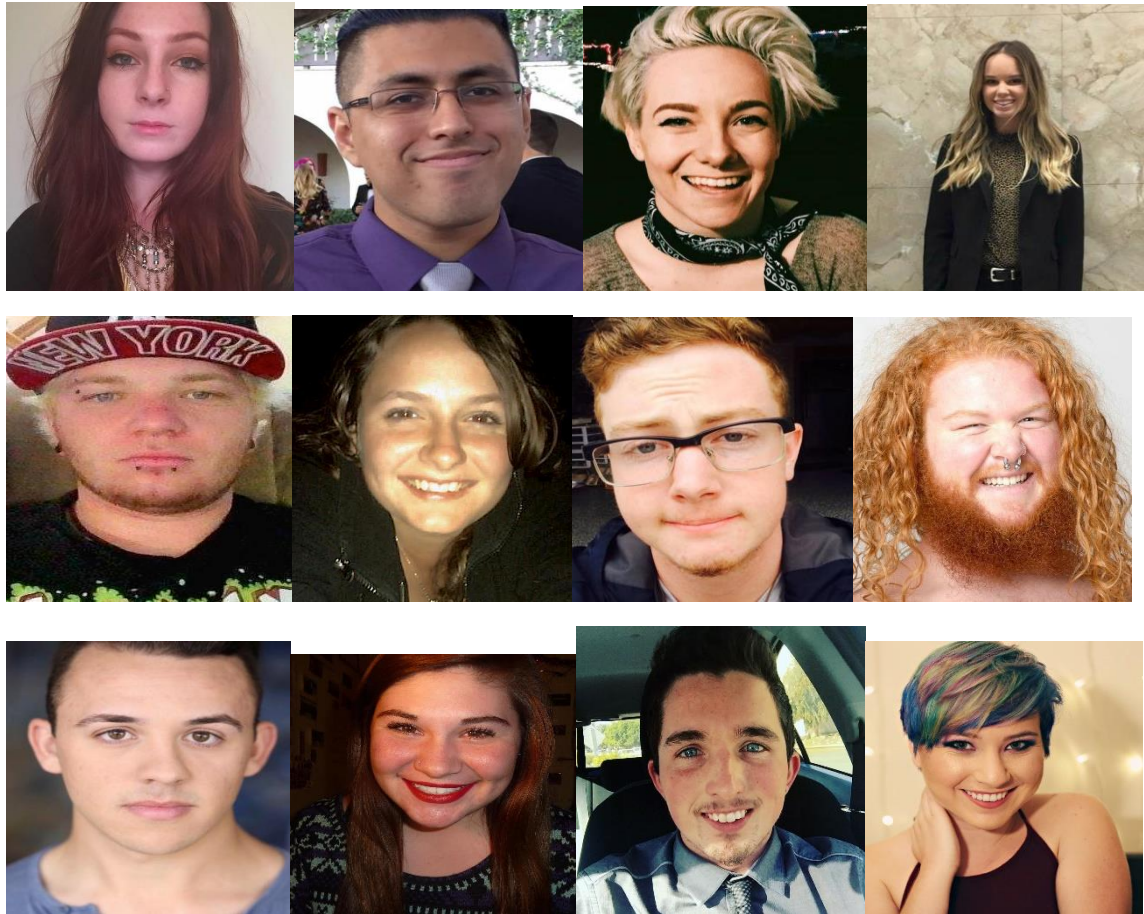
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Appendix A

Stimulus Photos



Appendix B

Letter Sent to Depicted Individuals

Hey! So I'm doing a research project at my university about appearance and stereotypes.

Basically, I'm theorizing that people will incorrectly judge people's sexual orientation based on their appearance alone (because obviously you can't tell someone is part of the LGBT

community by just looking at them 90% of the time.) I was wondering if you'd be willing to let me use your picture as one of the photos that people will have to be assuming their orientation.

The goal of my research is to show that you can't just judge someone by his or her appearance, because you will most likely be wrong. There will be no identifying information about you

(meaning I won't give your name, your sexual orientation, where you're from, etc.) I want to

choose people not from our university for a few reasons; mostly because I don't want the person I am testing to have prior knowledge of the depicted person (aka they had a class with them and

they all ready know their orientation.) I'm reaching out to you because in this current political

climate I think it's important to do research like this to prove our extremely conservative

Americans that looks are deceiving. I will obviously not use your photo if that make you

uncomfortable, because I totally get that! If you have any questions I can answer them to the best of my abilities!

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

Introduction

The researchers are conducting this project are undergraduate students at Lindenwood University who are enrolled in the PSY40400: Advanced Research Methods course.

Procedures

This survey asks you to respond to a few demographic items as well as questions asking whether you believe a depicted individual is heterosexual or not heterosexual. This questionnaire will be conducted with an online Qualtrics-created survey, and should not take any more than 10-15 minutes of your time.

Risks/Discomforts

There are no known risks associated with this study. If you do not feel comfortable completing any part of this survey, you are free to skip any questions or withdraw without penalty.

Compensation and Benefits

By taking part in this study, you will earn bonus points toward your LPP participating course. You will also gain experience taking part in a psychological survey project and potentially learn more about the field. If you are interested in learning more about this project or would like to learn about the results of this project once completed, please contact Kelsey Smith at kas003@lionmail.lindenwood.edu

Confidentiality

No personally identifying information will be collected, including your IP Address. All data obtained from participants will be kept confidential and will only be reported in an aggregate format (by reporting only combined results and never reporting individual ones). All questionnaires will be concealed, and no one other than the researchers listed below and their course professor, Dr. Michiko Nohara-LeClair. The data collected will be stored in the HIPPA-compliant, Qualtrics-secure database until it has been deleted by the primary investigator.

Questions about the Research

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Kelsey Smith at kas003@lionmail.lindenwood.edu or direct your inquiries to the course professor, Dr. Nohara-LeClair at mnohara-leclair@lindenwood.edu or (636)949-4371.

ELECTRONIC CONSENT: Please select your choice below.

Clicking on the "Agree" button below indicates that:

- You have read the above information.
- You voluntarily agree to participate.
- You are at least 18 years of age or you are a minor but have a signed parental consent form filed with the LPP Office.

Appendix D

Survey for Participants

Q2 What do you believe this person's sexual orientation to be?

- Heterosexual (1)
- Not Heterosexual (2)

Q4 How confident are you in your answer?

_____ Click to write Choice 1 (1)

Q7 What do you believe this person's sexual orientation to be?

- Heterosexual (1)
- Not Heterosexual (2)

Q8 How confident are you in your answers?

_____ Click to write Choice 3 (1)

Q10 What do you believe this person's sexual orientation to be?

- Heterosexual (1)
- Not Heterosexual (2)

Q11 How confident are you in your answer?

_____ Click to write Choice 3 (1)

Q13 What do you believe this person's sexual orientation to be?

- Heterosexual (1)
- Not Heterosexual (2)

Q14 How confident are you in your answer?

_____ Click to write Choice 3 (1)

Q16 What do you believe this person's sexual orientation to be?

- Heterosexual (1)
- Not Heterosexual (2)

Q17 How confident are you in your answer?

_____ Click to write Choice 3 (1)

Q19 What do you believe this person's sexual orientation to be?

Heterosexual (1)

Not Heterosexual (2)

Q20 How confident are you in you answer?

_____ Click to write Choice 3 (1)

Q23 What do you believe this person's sexual orientation to be?

Heterosexual (1)

Not Heterosexual (2)

Q26 How confident are you in you answer?

_____ Click to write Choice 3 (1)

Q29 What do you believe this person's sexual orientation to be?

Heterosexual (1)

Not Heterosexual (2)

Q30 How confident are you in you answer?

_____ Click to write Choice 3 (1)

Q32 What do you believe this person's sexual orientation to be?

Heterosexual (1)

Not Heterosexual (2)

Q33 How confident are you in you answer?

_____ Click to write Choice 3 (1)

Q38 What do you believe this person's sexual orientation to be?

- Heterosexual (1)
- Not Heterosexual (2)

Q39 How confident are you in your answer?

_____ Click to write Choice 3 (1)

Q41 What do you believe this person's sexual orientation to be?

- Heterosexual (1)
- Not Heterosexual (2)

Q42 How confident are you in your answer?

_____ Click to write Choice 3 (1)

Q39 What do you believe this person's sexual orientation to be?

- Heterosexual (1)
- Not Heterosexual (2)

Q40 How confident are you in your answer?

_____ Click to write Choice 3 (1)

Appendix E

Debriefing Letter

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. The questions on this particular survey allowed me to find out how perceptions of others can lead to bias.

I hypothesized that individuals who have unconventional appearances would be more likely to be labeled as not heterosexual. Someone who breaks societal norms means someone who goes against what is considered the standard that most of society considers acceptable. I also hypothesize that people will not be able to correctly identify whether someone is heterosexual or not heterosexual by looking at a picture alone.

Although I cannot provide you with individual findings due to the fact that this survey was conducted anonymously, I would be happy to answer any questions you may have about this study. Please feel free to contact me using the information below.

Thank you again for contributing data to my project!

Student Researcher:

Kelsey Smith: kas003@lionmail.lindenwood.edu

Faculty Supervisor:

Dr. Michiko Nohara-LeClair

636-949-4371

mnohara-leclair@lindenwood.edu

Appendix F

Demographic Survey

Display This Question:

If Are you or anyone you know part of the LGBT+ community Yes Is Selected

Q35 Do you believe your familiarity with the LGBT+ community impacted any of your decisions?

- Yes (1)
- Unsure (2)
- No (3)

Display This Question:

If Do you believe this impacted any of your decisions? No Is Not Selected

Q36 How do you think knowing someone in the LGBT+ community may have impacted your decisions?

Display This Question:

If Are you or anyone you know part of the LGBT+ community No Is Selected

Q49 How do you think not knowing anyone in the LGBT+ community may have impacted your decisions?

Q42 What is your gender identity?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Non-binary (3)
- Other (4)
- Prefer Not To Answer (5)

Q44 What is your ethnicity?

- White (1)
- Black or African American (2)
- Hispanic or Latino (3)
- American Indian or Alaska Native (4)
- Asian (5)
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (6)
- Other (7)
- Mixed (8)

Q45 Do you consider yourself religious?

- Definitely yes (1)
- Probably yes (2)
- Might or might not (3)
- Probably not (4)
- Definitely not (5)

Q46 How many years have you attended Lindenwood?

Q47 Would you consider yourself more liberal or conservative?

_____ Click to write Choice 1 (1)