Does Perceived Attractiveness Depend on Who Else You Recently Saw?

When we judge others' attractiveness, how is our judgment constructed? Is it based solely on the features of the individual? Or do we take into account the attractiveness of others who are nearby? This experiment is designed to determine whether contextual information is integrated over time when people judge the attractiveness of faces. Previous work on the "Cheerleader Effect" suggests that a person is seen as more attractive when they are presented in a group rather than individually, presumably because people extract an average or ensemble representation across the set of faces that is more attractive than any of the component faces. To test whether the "Cheerleader Effect" holds for faces seen over time, we ask participants to rate the attractiveness of famous female faces presented in a series of three versus in isolation. Participants use a continuous sliding scale to rate each face only after all faces in the sequence have been presented. We vary the attractiveness of the faces in the series to determine whether and how people integrate information over time in making these judgments. One face in the sequence (either the first or last) is "unattractive" (i.e., the celebrity without makeup, photographed poorly) and the rest are "attractive" (i.e., the celebrity with makeup, photographed well). We ask whether the perceived attractiveness of the middle face depends on the attractiveness of neighboring faces. The effect could pattern in one of three ways: (1) earlier faces might figure more heavily into people's judgments of the middle face, (2) later faces might figure in more heavily, or (3) the nature of the ensemble code that people extract may not depend on the order in which faces are presented. These findings will inform our understanding of the role of context over time in how people perceive attractiveness in others.

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