

Can being attractive get you out of a prison sentence?


Introduction:

Appearances can affect many aspects of your life: the job you get, your partners, your friends, etc. It can also affect if you are found guilty or not in court. The effect of attractiveness on guilty or not guilty verdicts has mixed findings.

- A meta-analysis by Mazzella and Feingold (1994) found participants rated attractive defendants as less guilty and assigned less punishment to them. However, this only occurred for rape, robbery and cheating.
- Similar results for rape cases were found by Jacobson (1981) but Winters et al. (2022) found no significant effect of teacher attractiveness on teacher-student sexual offence cases.
- Ford et al. (2022) had a similar methodology to our study, reported that facial agreeableness significantly increased the probability of a guilty verdict for rape, assault and burglary crimes.

An example of the guilt condition

This man is being charged with sexual assault after an incident in which a woman was followed on to a bus and was sexually assaulted.



Do you think this man is innocent or guilty of the crime described above?

Definitely Innocent Definitely Guilty

An example of the attractiveness condition



How attractive is this man?

Very Unattractive Very Attractive

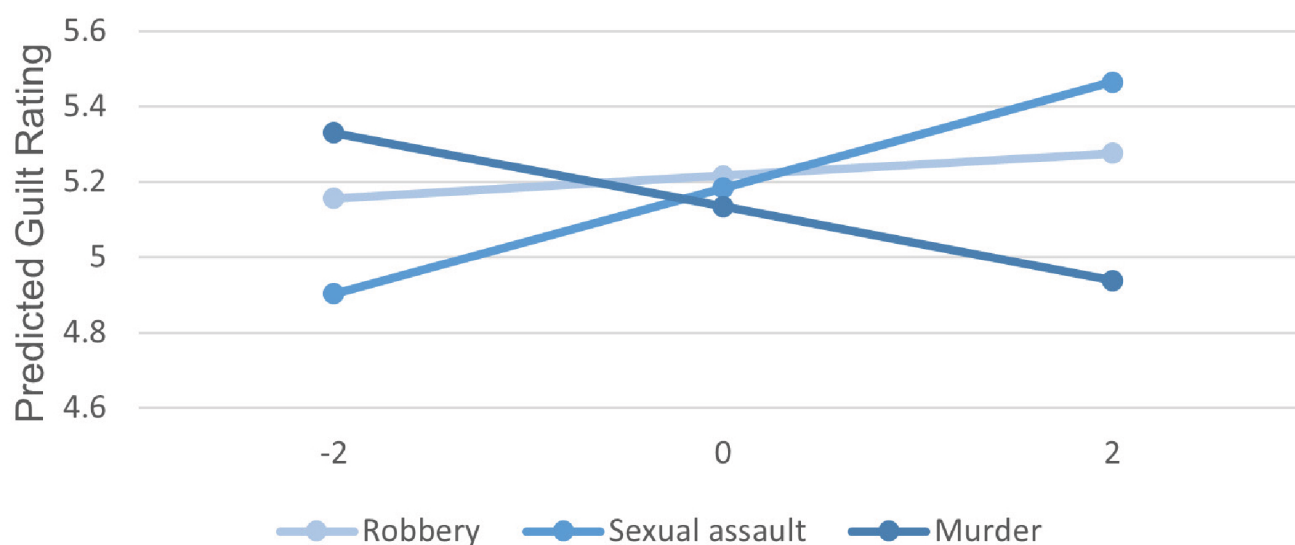
Method:

- Participants were shown 60 silent five-second videos of white males.
- A quarter of the participants were asked to rate attractiveness, the rest were given a crime description and asked how guilty they believed the individual was of that crime.

Results:

- Using Bayesian analysis, it was found that defendants who were more attractive were found to be more guilty of sexual assault and rape crimes than their less attractive counterparts.
- However, this effect was the opposite for murder.
- Less attractive defendants were found to be more guilty.
- No effect found of attractiveness on guilt for robbery/burglary crime descriptions.
- No other significant results were found when using a Linear Mixed Model.

The effect of type of crime and attractiveness on guilt ratings



Discussion:

- This support and contradict findings by Mazzella and Feingold (1994) who found an effect of attractiveness on rape and robbery. We only found an effect for rape.
- Our findings contradict Winters et al. (2022) who did not find an effect of attractiveness on sexual offences and Jacobson (1981) who found an effect but in the opposite direction to our results.
- Our findings may counter results from other studies as we used more realistic stimuli than previous research.
- Expanding on this research, this technique could be used to establish whether there is any effect of attractiveness on guilt for different races and genders.

References:

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