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Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)**Halo Effect and Cognitive Bias: The Impact of Skin Tone and Facial Dominance on Trait Attribution****Haram Siddique**

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This study was conducted as part of a student research project. We have no known of conflict of interest. Correspondence concerning this manuscript should be addressed to Haram Siddique, Department of Psychology, GIFT University, Email: 23101340015@gift.edu.pk

Abstract

The halo effect, an individual's tendency to form an overall impression based on specific traits, has not been widely explored within South Asian culture. The study examined this cognitive bias by assessing how university students attribute traits to others based on race, skin tone and dominant features. The study sample comprised of 223 university students aged 18-30 years. The study used an online survey. Participants were asked to rate the 64 photographs of Indian and Western individuals with equal ratio of dark and fair faces that were further categorized into dominant and non-dominant faces. The findings revealed that participants assigned more positive and less negative attributes to western faces than Indian faces. Indian and western faces with light skin tones were assigned more positive attributes than Indian and Western faces with dark skin tones. Also, participants assigned more positive attributes to Western faces with fair and dark skin tones in contrast to Indian faces with light and dark skin tones. Furthermore, within dark and fair skin tones of both Indians and Westerners the participants gave more positive attributes to individuals with dominant features than to those with non-dominant faces. In contrast to Indian faces with dark and light skin tones and dominant and non-dominant features, Western faces with light and dark skin tones and dominant and non-dominant features were attributed more positive traits and less negative traits. This study concluded that participants attributed more positive traits to Westerners than to Indians based on race, skin tones and facial features revealing a cognitive bias in our society.

Keywords: Indians, westerners, positive attributes, dominant features, skin tone

Public significance statement

This study shows that individuals tend to associate more positive traits to people of Western appearance compared to Indian appearance, revealing the impact of cultural bias. The findings highlight how race, skin tone, and facial features influence how we judge others, even in subtle, unconscious ways. Understanding these biases is crucial for addressing issues of prejudice and stereotyping in diverse societies

Introduction

Edward Thorndike in 1920 describes the halo effects that are considered a cognitive bias, illustrates how an individual's judgment on one positive trait influences their entire public image leading to biased judgments of other characteristics. This phenomenon emphasizes the importance of first impressions in shaping our overall perceptions of others. Essentially, the halo effect suggests that a single positive attribute, such as physical attractiveness, can dominate and mislead our initial impressions, leading to broad and frequently incorrect judgments of a person's other characteristics ^[1]. There are different kinds of the halo effect that can affect the perception in various ways. First of all, it was proved that attractive people are considered being more competent, sociable and intelligent in comparison with rather unattractive people ^[2]. The Attractive halo effect means that, in relation to physical appearance, those individuals deemed as attractive were regarded as being intelligent, kind, capable and so on ^[3].

Furthermore, the halo bias can similarly be analyzed in linkage with dominant and non-dominant. Symmetry, skin quality, and the correctness of anterior and posterior face formation are all taken into consideration in persons with attractive faces. Physical characteristics play a significant role predicting beauty, where facial features are most dominant and more attractive peoples have symmetrical faces as they are seen to be healthier. ^[4] On the other hand, non-dominant features are associated with young age, obedience and shyness or friendliness. For instance, round jawlines, thick eyebrows, and small eyes suggest dominance and maturity, good body strength and ability to lead ^[5]. They considered asymmetry, disproportionate features, and skin imperfections can detract from perceptions of attractiveness, leading to a less favorable overall impression. ^[6].

The halo effect can be also affected by the skin color, both light and dark skin color affects it. Research has revealed that skin texture and color provide information that affects perceived attractiveness of both male and female faces, ^[7] but the relationship between physiognomic features and facial attractiveness is still a relatively unexplored avenue of inquiry ^[8,9]. According to implicit personality theory Cronbach (1955) states that one forms an impression about another individual by pairing various personality traits or human characteristics together. People often make inferences about an individual's other traits based on the presence of one trait. It can contribute to the formation of stereotypes, where generalized beliefs about groups of people (e.g., racial, skin colour, occupational groups) influence expectations about individuals from those groups ^[10].

Recent researches on the halo effect has revealed how physical attractiveness infiltrates different areas. The halo effect of faces and bodies was experimentally tested by these researches among Germans (Western Europeans) and Japanese. All three groups showed strong attractiveness halo effects for both faces and bodies (discussed above), as well as a dominance halo effect for bodies but not faces; thus, future work should investigate the facial-level extension of these same cultural differences. Similarly, another research examined the "attractiveness halo effect" across 45 countries across all global regions. In a data collection process conducted by the Psychological Science Accelerator, which asks for scores on 120 faces with Personality characteristics. Additionally, the results revealed a significant positive relationship between attractiveness and every other index of a socially desirable personality ^[11,12]. Thus, we now have evidence from the current study that the "attractiveness halo" effect can be

obtained across cultural boundaries. This study highlights the dearth of studies that have examined the halo effect in both individualistic and collectivistic cultures.

Research has found that women with high levels of facial symmetry are characterized as attractive and trustworthy, whereas women perceived as unattractive or distrustful tend to have non-symmetrical faces ^[13]. However, this perception regarding facial proportionality lacks attention to other aspects that affect attractiveness, such as dominant and non-dominant facial features and skin color. This study fulfilled this gap.

Additionally, the stereotype that "The beautiful is good" also ensures that attractive people are automatically invested with positive qualities to create more job opportunities and relationships ^[14]. Although this provides insight into the notion that SOGIE stereotypes affect users' experiences of these platforms, it does not reveal variations in how individuals from different racial and gender groups may be perceived. The study is not examining Inter-sectional race and gender in the attribution of positive traits according to facial beauty. Our work intends to provide an answer by looking at both the extent and nature of "he beautiful is good" stereotype, how it may differ across races, sexes, and gender groups, thereby adding some specificity regarding these attributions in a broader societal framework.

Further findings highlight the complexity of issues related to skin tone, as white faces are often perceived as lighter than Black, even when individuals have mixed racial characteristics, ^[15] Study indicates expectations concerning more or less lightening influence seen glow on face. This study leaves a gap in the literature by not addressing other factors related to skin tone and its interaction with other facial traits, dominant, and proportion. Therefore, we will investigate this concern by examining how skin tone interacts with facial dominant and non-dominant features to create a more comprehensive picture of these interrelated components.

In their commentary on this, recent researchers argued that the first impression from the face field is largely based on white faces and possibly may lead to distorted scientific knowledge and even turn out classist as well as racist ^[16]. This study did not address how a greater range of racial and facial features can influence our judgement about others even in unconscious way. To provide possible answers, our research will seek to answer these questions using individuals from different Asian and western groups.

A cross-sectional study showed that physical attractiveness plays an important role in a politician's competency-around bias mechanism ^[17]. This research solely focuses on attractiveness and political competency, and the study did not address whether these biases extend to a normal population or only consider physical attractiveness. Thus, we investigate how these biases influence a broader population by including Asian and Western races and facial features.

Considering the above-mentioned gap in the above studies the present study was carried out to explore the fact that how specific attributes like skin tone, facial features, affect the attribution of the personality traits. There is limited research present on the perception of university students that shed light on prejudice. The present research focused at the way people attributes traits to others based on their skin complexion, facial features and race taking into account trustworthy, attractive, and competent and so on. It could have a major implication in social psychology, for overcoming and recognizing the prejudices in day-to-day interactions.

The Present Study

The objective of the present study was to explore the phenomenon that participants would be more likely to give positive or negative traits to Indians or Westerns (fair/ dark skin toned faces, dominant/non-dominant faces). Based on this, the hypotheses of the present study are given below;

- There will be significant differences in the association of positive and negative traits between Indians and Westerners
- There will be significant differences in the association of positive and negative traits between Indians and Westerners with Fair and dark skin tones.
- There will be significant differences in the association of positive and negative traits among Indian Fair skin tone and Indian dark skin tone with Dominant and Non-Dominant Features.
- There will be significant differences in the association of positive and negative traits among Western fair skin tone and Western dark skin tone with Dominant and Non-Dominant Features.

Method

Study Participants and Design

A sample of N=223 university students (Luker et al., 2003) was collected using the purposive sampling. Purposive sampling technique allowed for the intentional selection of the participants who met the study criteria which included participants with minimum education level of intermediate and aged 18 to 30.

Procedure

The present study was based on survey design. Participants were invited to take part in a study via e-mail that included a link to the online survey. They were informed that the study aimed to select either positive or negative trait, and they would be asked to consider photographs of various individuals. The stimulus images were taken from the open-source databases^[19,20]. Participants were also told that, for reasons of data privacy, the identity of the individuals in the photographs would not be revealed. Informed Consent with instructions regarding survey was given to all participants. Participants were asked to rate the associated positive and negative traits on a dichotomous scale (intelligence, responsible, trustworthiness, incompetent, dishonesty) as shown in figure 1. After data collection from all the participant’s data analysis was performed and results were concluded.

Figure 1

Shows the Example of Standardized Photographs with Response Options

Indian Face

Western Face



0= Moody 1= Trustworthy

0=Incompetent 1= Intelligent

Note. The participants were shown the two options on Google form for each of the 64 images shown to them. They were asked to select any option.

Primary Outcome

The 64 photographs of Indian and Western individuals with equal ratio of dark and fair faces that are more categorized into dominant and non-dominant faces (equal ratio of males and females pictures) were used in a Google Form. On Google Form participants selected either positive or negative traits (e.g. intelligence, responsible, trustworthiness, incompetent, dishonesty) associated with the photographed faces on a dichotomous scale (select either positive=1 or negative trait=0).^[18]

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using the SPSS version 27. The accuracy and missing items of SPSS database were screened and assumptions of normality were checked. Paired t-test analyses were used to analyze the data and recruiting the results.

Results

Table 1

Mean Differences in Traits Association among Indians and Westerns faces (N=223)

Variable	Indian		Western		t	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Traits							
Positive Traits	17.68	4.80	18.91	4.51	-.96	<.001	4.74
Negative Traits	14.33	4.79	14.01	4.49	.93	<.001	4.73

Note. M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation, t = t score, p = significance level

In table 1 paired sample t-test has been displayed for the comparison of positive and negative traits association with Indian and western faces. Results indicate a highly significant difference in attribution of positive and negative traits between Indian and Western faces ($p < .001$). It has been indicated that Western faces ($M = 18.91$, $SD = 4.51$) were rated significantly more positive traits than Indians ($M = 17.68$, $SD = 4.80$). On the other hand, the Indian faces ($M=14.33$, $SD=4.79$) were rated significantly more negative traits than westerns ($M=14.01$, $SD=4.49$). Thus, it is summarized that participants associate more positive traits with Westerner faces than Indian faces, associates more negative traits with Indians than Western faces.

Table 2

Mean Differences in Traits Association among Indians and Westerns with Fair and Dark Skin Tones (N=223)

Variable	Indian		Western		t	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Light Skin Tone							
Positive Traits	8.95	2.47	9.71	2.65	-4.32	<.001	2.64
Negative Traits	7.04	2.58	6.28	2.76	4.30	<.001	2.62
Dark skin Tone							
Positive Traits	8.28	3.20	8.73	3.14	1.72	<.001	3.93
Negative Traits	7.26	3.22	7.72	3.14	1.74	<.001	3.94

Note. M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation, t = t score, p = significance level

In table 2 shows the differences in the allocation of positive and negative traits among Indian and Western faces with fair and dark skin tones. Results indicate a highly significant difference in attribution of positive and negative traits among Indian and Western faces with light skin tones ($p < .001$). It has been

indicated that Western faces with light skin tone ($M = 9.71$, $SD = 2.65$) were rated significantly more positive traits than Indians ($M = 8.95$, $SD = 2.47$). In contrast the Indian faces with light skin tone ($M=7.04$, $SD=2.58$) were rated significantly more negative traits than western light skin tone faces ($M=6.28$, $SD=2.76$). Similarly, results also indicates a highly significant difference in attribution of positive and negative traits among Indian and Western faces dark skin tones ($p < .001$). It has been indicated that Western faces with dark skin tone ($M = 8.73$, $SD = 3.14$) were rated significantly more positive traits than Indians ($M = 8.28$, $SD = 3.20$). While, the Indian faces with dark skin tone ($M=7.26$, $SD=3.22$) were rated significantly more negative traits than western dark skin tone faces ($M=7.72$, $SD=3.14$). To sum up participants associate positive traits with westerner faces with light and dark skin tone than Indian faces with light and dark skin tone, conversely, participant's associates more negative traits with Indians faces with light and dark skin tones than Western faces with light and dark skin tones.

Table 3

Mean Differences in Traits Association among Indians with Dominant and Non-Dominant Features (N=223)

Indians	With Dominant Features		With non-Dominant Features		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
	<u>Light Skin Tone</u>						
Positive Traits	6.30	1.87	2.63	1.91	19.18	.04	2.84
Negative Traits	1.70	1.86	5.36	1.90	-19.18	.04	2.84
	<u>Dark skin Tone</u>						
Positive Traits	5.09	2.15	3.64	1.43	7.15	<.001	4.31
Negative Traits	2.90	2.16	4.35	1.45	3.65	<.001	2.87

Note. *M* = Mean, *SD* = Standard Deviation, *t* = *t* score, *p* = significance level

In table 3 shows the differences in the allocation of positive and negative traits among Indian light and dark faces with dominant and non-dominant features. Results indicates a highly significant difference in attribution of positive and negative traits to Indian face among Indian light skin faces with dominant and non-dominant features ($p < .001$). It has been indicated that Indian light skin faces with dominant features ($M = 6.30$, $SD = 1.87$) were rated significantly more positive traits than Indian light skin faces with non-dominant features ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 1.91$). While, the Indian light skin face with dominant features ($M=1.70$, $SD=1.86$) were rated less significant negative traits than Indian light skin faces with non-dominant features ($M=5.36$, $SD=1.90$). Similarly, results also indicates a highly significant difference in attribution of positive and negative traits to Indian dark skin faces among dominant and non-dominant features ($p < .001$). It has been indicated that Indian dark skin faces with dominant features ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 2.16$) were rated significantly more positive traits than Indians dark skin faces with non-dominant features ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.43$). In contrast, the Indian dark skin faces with dominant features ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 2.16$) were rated significantly lesser negative traits than Indians dark skin faces with non-dominant features ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.45$). Hence, we determined that participants associate more positive traits with Indian light skin dominant faces as compared to dark skin dominant faces. And similarly associates less negative with Indian light skin dominant faces as compared to dark skin dominant faces.

Table 4

Mean Differences in Traits Association Among Westerns with Dominant and Non-Dominant Features (N=223)

Westerns	With Dominant Features		With non-Dominant Features		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Cohen's d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
<u>Light Skin Tone</u>							
Positive Traits	6.54	1.68	3.17	1.74	22.42	<.001	3.37
Negative Traits	1.45	1.69	4.83	1.73	-7.13	.00	3.47
<u>Dark skin Tone</u>							
Positive Traits	5.37	2.20	2.90	2.21	9.25	.00	4.40
Negative Traits	2.63	2.21	5.09	2.19	-7.39	.00	4.39

Note. M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation, t = t score, p = significance level

In table 4 shows the differences in the allocation of positive and negative traits among westerner light and dark faces with dominant and non-dominant features. Results indicates a highly significant difference in attribution of positive and negative traits to western faces among western light skin faces with dominant and non-dominant features ($p = .00$). It has been indicated that western light skin faces with dominant features ($M = 6.54$, $SD = 1.68$) were rated significantly more positive traits than westerner light skin faces with non-dominant features ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.74$). While, the westerner light skin face with dominant features ($M=1.45$, $SD=1.69$) were rated significantly less negative traits than western light skin faces with non-dominant features ($M=4.83$, $SD=1.73$). Similarly, results also indicates a highly significant difference in attribution of positive and negative traits to westerner dark skin faces among dominant and non-dominant features ($p = .00$). It has been indicated that western dark skin faces with dominant features ($M = 5.37$, $SD = 2.20$) were rated significantly more positive traits than Indians dark skin faces with non-dominant features ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 1.21$). Whereas the western dark skin faces with dominant features ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 2.21$) were rated significantly lower negative traits than western dark skin faces with non-dominant features ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 2.19$). Therefore, it is concluded that participants associate more positive traits with western light skin dominant faces as compared to dark skin dominant faces. And similarly associates less negative with western light skin dominant faces as compared to dark skin dominant face.

Discussion

The current study aimed to explore cultural and racial differences in the allocation of positive and negative traits to facial features, focusing on Western and Indian faces with varying skin tones and dominant versus non-dominant facial features. The study found significant differences in the allocation of positive and negative traits between Indian and Western faces. Western faces were rated more positively and less negatively than Indian faces. Similarly, both fair and dark-skinned Western faces were associated with more positive traits compared to their Indian counterparts. Moreover, dominant features in both Indian and Western faces, regarding their skin tone, were associated with more positive traits and fewer negative traits in contrast to non-dominant features. The findings support the initial hypotheses, revealing significant differences in trait associations across cultures and between different facial attributes.

The results from the first hypothesis indicate that Western faces were rated more positively compared to Indian faces, while Indian faces were associated with more negative traits. This finding aligns with the broader literature on the halo effect, particularly within individualistic cultures where physical attractiveness is often more strongly linked to positive personality traits^[18]. The "The beautiful

is good" stereotype seems to operate more robustly within Western faces, likely reflecting societal biases influenced by Western media and beauty standards ^[21]. These results suggest that Western cultural standards of beauty and facial dominance may significantly impact social perceptions across people from subcontinent associated with Western and Indian observers.

In relation to Hypothesis 2, the data demonstrate that Western fair-skinned faces received more positive ratings than Indian fair-skinned faces. This finding supports the existing research that indicates Western standards of beauty, which often favor lighter skin tones, play a significant role in the formation of positive first impressions ^[22]. However, it is important to note that while Western fair-skinned faces were rated more positively, dark-skinned Western faces were still perceived more favorably than Indian brown-skinned faces. This may suggest that perceptions of attractiveness are not solely determined by skin tone but also by cultural factors and stereotypes associated with race and ethnicity ^[23].

For Hypotheses 3 and 4, dominant facial features were consistently associated with more positive trait ratings, regardless of skin tone or culture. These results are consistent with prior findings that facial symmetry and dominance are important determinants of perceived attractiveness and trustworthiness ^[24]. In particular, Indian and Western faces with dominant features were rated more positively, reflecting the universal appeal of symmetry and proportionality in perceptions of attractiveness ^[14]. This finding extends the literature on the attractiveness halo effect by showing that facial dominance, even within varying skin tones, significantly influences positive social judgments.

The theoretical implications of this study are twofold. First, it provides scientific evidence for the robustness of the halo effect across cultural contexts, emphasizing the influence of Western beauty standards on global perceptions of attractiveness. Second, it highlights the importance of facial dominance in shaping positive trait attributions, suggesting that dominance may be a cross-cultural determinant of attractiveness. These findings have practical implications, particularly in domains like hiring practices, marketing, and media representation, where facial biases can influence decision-making.

Conclusion

This study enriches the existing literature on the halo effect and cross-cultural perceptions of traits attribution based on attractiveness. By demonstrating the significant impact of facial dominance and skin tone on trait associations across Indian and Western faces, the findings provide new insights into the universal and culturally specific factors that shape our social judgments. These results underscore the need for a more nuanced understanding of how beauty standards and cultural stereotypes influence perceptions of attractiveness, offering valuable directions for future research and practical applications in reducing biases in various social domains.

Limitation of Existing Research

The research was conducted with university students in Gujranwala, which limits the generalizability of present research. The present study captured data at a single point, which restricts the detection of changes over time. Cultural and contextual specificity is another limitation, as the study was conducted within a specific local context in Pakistan. The halo effect may manifest differently in other regions or countries due to unique cultural factors, limiting the applicability of the findings to more diverse populations. Addressing these limitations in future studies will enhance the understanding of the halo effect and its implications in various settings.

Direction for Future Research

Future research should expand on this study by including more diverse participant samples, particularly from collectivistic cultures, to better understand how cultural values influence the halo effect. The interaction between dynamic facial features and static attributes like symmetry and skin tone

should be explored to provide a more comprehensive understanding of facial attractiveness and its social implications.

Supplementary data

Databases are available at:

<https://www.freepik.com/free-photos-vectors/database>

<https://osf.io/f7zbv/>

Data for this study are available at:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1YmYkk9NM9v_QM4orp1SubYQSJe6Uz1iz/view?usp=sharing

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Appendix



64 Pairs Of Positive and Negative Traits

1	Intelligent	Rude
2	Trustworthy	Irresponsible
3	Responsible	Selfish
4	Kind	Moody
5	Confident	Careless
6	Sociable	Dishonest
7	Ambitious	Incompetent
8	Creative	Manipulative
9	Courageous	Unhelpful
10	Empathy	Unfair
11	Competent	Self-centered
12	Calm	Distrustful
13	Humble	Bored
14	Hardworking	Disorganized
15	Skillful	Aggressive
16	Honest	Argumentative
17	Friendly	Egoistic
18	Knowledgeable	Disobedient
19	Polite	Insincere
20	Helpful	Conflicted
21	Supportive	Lazy
22	Sincere	Stubborn
23	Joyful	Uncooperative
24	Disciplined	Cruel
25	Truthful	Harsh
26	Well-organized	Judgmental
27	Confident	Self-centered
28	Sociable	Distrustful
29	Ambitious	Uncooperative
30	Creative	Cruel
31	Courageous	Harsh
32	Empathy	Judgmental
33	Humble	Incompetent
34	Hardworking	Manipulative
35	Skillful	Unhelpful
36	Honest	Unfair
37	Friendly	Self-centered
38	Knowledgeable	Distrustful
39	Polite	Rude
40	Disciplined	Irresponsible
41	Truthful	Selfish
42	Well-organized	Moody
43	Competent	Careless
44	Calm	Dishonest
45	Joyful	Unfair
46	Helpful	Self-centered

47	Supportive	Distrustful
48	Sincere	Bored
49	Joyful	Disorganized
50	Intelligent	Self-centered
51	Trustworthy	Rude
52	Responsible	Irresponsible
53	Kind	Selfish
54	Humble	Moody
55	Hardworking	Careless
56	Skillful	Dishonest
57	Honest	Manipulative
58	Joyful	Unhelpful
59	Skillful	Unfair
60	Honest	Self-centered
61	Friendly	Distrustful
62	Knowledgeable	Rude
63	Trustworthy	Uncooperative
64	Responsible	Cruel
