Standing out in a crowd—attractiveness judged on who we are with

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Standing out in a crowd; attractiveness judged on who we are with. Credit: Royal Holloway, University of London

Research published in the journal *Psychological Science* has shown that judgements of attractiveness vary depending on who is nearby, and how good-looking they are in comparison. A person will rank higher on a scale of attractiveness when compared alongside less attractive people, than they would when judged alone.

Popular opinion points to a person's perceived level of attractiveness as somehow fixed. However, research from Royal Holloway, University of

London shows that context is key to assessing attractiveness.

In attraction, a crowd can be an asset

Dr Nicholas Furl, of Royal Holloway's Department of Psychology, author of the study explains: "Rightly or wrongly, the way people look has a profound impact on the way others perceive them. We live in a society obsessed with beauty and attractiveness, but how we measure and understand these concepts is still a grey area."

He continued, "Until now, it's been understood that a person's level of attractiveness is generally steady. If you saw a picture of George Clooney today, you would rate him as good-looking as you would tomorrow. However, this work demonstrates that the company we keep has an effect on how attractive we appear to others."

The study demonstrates that how attractive we are is far from static, it can fluctuate. According to the paper, an averagely attractive face surrounded by undesirable faces will become more appealing than it would on its own.

Does a crowd breed criticism?

Participants in the study were asked to rate pictures of different faces for attractiveness, one by one.

They were then asked to assess the same faces, placed alongside ones perceived to be undesirable. When adding these 'distractor faces', the attractiveness of the same faces increased from the first round of ranking.

Participants were then shown two attractive faces, alongside a 'distractor'

face and asked to judge between them. The presence of the less attractive face was found to make the viewers more critical between the attractive face, as Dr Furl explained:

"The presence of a less attractive face does not just increase the attractiveness of a single person, but in a crowd could actually make us even more choosey! We found that the presence of a 'distractor' face makes differences between attractive people more obvious and that observers start to pull apart these differences, making them even more particular in their judgement."

What lies beneath and beyond?

Dr Furl concluded, "It's perhaps not too surprising that we are judged in relation to those around us. This is a trope often seen in teen movies and romantic comedies, where a character associates themselves with a less attractive friend to elevate their own dating stakes.

"Last year's film The Duff, - an acronym for the rather unfortunate and unfair term 'Designated Ugly Fat Friend' explored how the main character felt being physically compared to her friendship group. As in life, this film showed that how we perceive beauty and attractiveness isn't fixed. There are many other ways in which we decide who we are attracted to. There will certainly be more research in years to come on this complicated area of human interaction, and I am excited to see where this research takes us."