Running Head: VARIABLES INFLUENCING FORGIVENESS

Effects of transgressor attractiveness on forgiveness depending on both participant gender and transgressor gender

Zandra D'Ambrosio

Hofstra University

Abstract

The present study sought to examine the effect of transgressor attractiveness on willingness to forgive depending on both participant gender and transgressor gender. Sixty-five undergraduate men and women participated. The analysis revealed a marginally significant 3 way interaction between transgressor attractiveness, transgressor gender, and participant gender. Thus, when the transgressor was physically unattractive, men and women both gave an equal advantage to women when forgiving. When the transgressor was physically attractive, men forgive male and female transgressors equally, whereas women were more willing to forgive attractive male transgressors than attractive female transgressors.

Effects of transgressor attractiveness on forgiveness depending on both participant gender and transgressor gender

The physical attractiveness stereotype holds that people attribute all sorts of positive characteristics to physically attractive individuals, whereas people attribute socially undesirable characteristics to physically unattractive individuals (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972). A classic study that was designed to test the physical attractiveness stereotype was conducted by Dion, Berscheid and Walster (1972), who measured participants' perceptions of others' personality traits and successful life outcomes (such as marital happiness, and career success). Each participant rated photos of people who were extremely physically unattractive, extremely physically attractive, or average in physical attractiveness. The results showed that people attributed more positive characteristics (personality traits) and successful life outcomes to people appeared extremely attractive in the photo. A meta-analysis of numerous studies confirmed that physically attractive people are better liked, viewed more positively, and have more positive characteristics attributed to them than their less attractive counterparts (Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991).

In addition to research showing that physically attractive people are better liked, viewed more positively, and have more positive characteristics attributed to them than their less attractive counterparts, research has also found that physical appearance acts as a benefit in the court of law. In one study, Deitz, Byrnes, and Lynne (1972) had participants act as mock jurors. These researchers found that, in comparison to the unattractive defendants, the attractive defendants were convicted less often, punished less severely, and rated as less responsible for the charges being brought against them. Overall, less punishment was given to the attractive defendants, regardless of the attractiveness or gender of the participant.

The Present Study

The Deitz et al., 1972 study nicely supports aspects of the present study. Because attractive individuals are viewed as being less responsible for their actions (Deitz, Byrnes, & Lynne (1972), they are viewed more positively, and they are viewed as being less capable of antisocial behavior, it would be interesting to know whether attractive individuals are more likely to be forgiven by others when they act as the transgressor in a conflict. In addition, the Deitz et al., 1972 study, defendants were all males. However, it seems likely that an individual's willingness to forgive will be influenced by the physical attractiveness of female transgressors as well as male transgressors. In light of the forgoing, I hypothesize that people would be more likely to forgive attractive transgressors.

It also seems likely that the effect of transgressor attractiveness on forgiveness would depend on both participant gender and transgressor gender. Therefore, the present study will also investigate whether an interaction exists between transgressor attractiveness and participant gender. Because women gave a harsher sentence to attractive defendants in Deitz et al., 1972 study, I predict that men are more likely than women to forgive attractive transgressors. However, it is unclear whether there will be an interaction between transgressor gender and participant gender, because Deitz et al., 1972 study did not include female defendants. All other main effects and interactions are exploratory and no predictions were made for them.

Method

Participants

Sixty-five undergraduate students enrolled at Hofstra University during the Spring Semester, 2005 (15 males, 49 females), participated in the *Effects of Transgressor Attractiveness on Forgiveness Depending on Participant Gender and Transgressor Gender* study. Participants

averaged 20.6 years of age (*SD* = 4.29). Of the total sample, 70% were Caucasian (*n* = 45), 14% were Latino (*n* = 9), 6% were African American (*n* = 4), 2% were Native American (*n* = 1), 2% were Asian (*n* = 1), and 6% indicated "other" for their race (*n* = 4). Of the total sample, 30% were freshman (*n* = 19), 31% were sophomores (*n* = 20), 22% were juniors (*n* = 11), and 17% were seniors (*n* = 64).

Procedure

The survey was distributed to students from a lower-division, fundamental psychology class (which is an introductory psychology class for non-majors) and to an elective psychology class (mainly consisting of psychology majors). All of students received extra credit in exchange for their participation. Convenience sampling was used because recruitment was limited to undergraduate students in several classes, not giving every single student an equal chance of participating. The only eligibility requirement for the study was that participants be college students who were 18 years or older. There were no restrictions on gender or ethnicity.

The investigator recruited participants by requesting the permission of the instructor to distribute the surveys for completion by the students during class time. The investigator introduced the study to the students and discussed the voluntary nature of the study. Instructions were given to the students with regard to reading and signing the informed consent form. Students were told to keep a copy of the informed consent form for themselves and return a separate copy to the investigator. Once the survey was completed and handed in, the participants were debriefed (i.e., the investigator discussed the study in more detail, explaining the hypothesis and predictions). Participants were thanked for their participation in the study and notified that all informed consent forms would be filed in the locked office of the supervisor of the project (Dr. Christine Rini).

Materials

Participants completed a "forgiveness" survey that determined their willingness to forgive in variety of scenarios. Each survey consisted of two informed consent forms, an instructions page, eight forgiveness scenarios with photos, and a general demographic/personal history questionnaire that gathered information such as gender, age, race/ethnicity, and class standing.

Photos. Each of the eight scenarios was paired with a separate photo. The photos depicted attractive versus unattractive men and women. Prior to the experiment, an independent sample of 17 undergraduate students in an upper-division psychological research methods seminar at Hofstra University rated the attractiveness of men and women in the photos (which were used to portray the transgressor of each scenario). The photos were selected by the investigator from photos available on the Internet. Each student in the research methods seminar received a packet consisting of 43 photos of men and women and was asked to rate each photo for physical attractiveness on a scale from 1 (extremely unattractive) to 10 (extremely attractive). After handing in the photos, participants were thanked and the investigator discussed the study in more detail, explaining the hypothesis and predictions. Photos depicting two equally attractive men, two equally attractive women, two equally unattractive men, and two equally unattractive women were then selected for use in the study based on the ratings provided by the sample.

Scenarios. Scenarios were selected from the "Willingness to Forgive" scale (DeShea, 2003). Scenarios were selected that described conflicts between friends, roommates, and relatives so that college students could easily relate to them. Each photo was randomly paired with a scenario because all of the scenarios are equivalent (DeShea, 2003).

The eight scenarios were:

Scenario 1: You come home from work and catch your roommate looking at your private journal. Your roommate claims to have been looking for a dictionary and really hadn't read much of your journal.

Scenario 2: A friend asks to borrow $100 until next month. You agree and make the loan. You wait six weeks, then you ask your friend to repay the debt, but your friend keeps putting it off. Five months later, you still haven't collected the payment.

Scenario 3: Your good friend invites you to a party where you won't know anyone else. You agreed to meet at the hotel where the party is being held. Your friend says hello to you but then ignores you most of the party. Finally, you just leave.

Scenario 4: You ask a friend to stay at your home while you are out of town for the week. When you come home, the front door is unlocked and no one is there. When confronted about it, your friend shrugs it off and says nothing happened, so why worry about the door accidentally being left unlocked.

Scenario 5: Whenever you see each other, your aunt teases you about your weight. You try to tell her that the teasing bothers you, but she doesn’t seem to understand or care, because the comments continue.

Scenario 6: a friend stops calling you to do things together. You bring it to your friend’s attention, and your friend apologized. Then several weeks go by without a phone call, and your

phone messages go unanswered. When you finally contact your friend and ask what is going on, your friend gets angry and yells at you to quit being so controlling.

Scenario 7: Someone who has been a close friend for a number of years goes to live in another city. When you are both in your hometown for a holiday, you call this person on the phone. But your friend says they are too busy to see you and that you are a part of their "old" life.

Scenario 8: A co-worker asks you to run a work-related errand, but you are in the middle of another project that you consider more important, and you say so. After your day off, you come back to work and learn from your boss that your co-worker had complained that you were uncooperative and difficult.

Participants were instructed to read through each scenario imagining that they were the innocent person in the scenarios whom the transgressor has treated badly. They then were asked to report how willing would they would be to forgive the person in the photo by responding to the question, "How willing would you be to forgive this person?" Respondents used a rating scale of 0 (not willing at all) to 6 (completely willing). Participants also completed a semantic differential scale (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957) for 4 adjective pairs (good/bad, sincere/insincere, pleasant/unpleasant, warm/cold) that asked them to give an overall evaluation of the person in the photo; however they were not used in the analyses. Evaluation data were not used in this study and will not be discussed further.

A general demographic/personal history questionnaire was used to gather information such as gender, age, race/ethnicity, and class standing. These data were used for descriptive statistics. In addition, participant gender was examined as a potential predictor of forgiveness.

Results

For the willingness to forgive (WTF) scale, the possible scores range from 0 (completely unwilling to forgive) to 6 (extremely willing to forgive). Descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1.

A repeated measures ANOVA was performed with participant gender as a between subjects factor and transgressor attractiveness and gender as within subject factors. In addition, the eight scenarios were repeated measured within subjects. The results of the ANOVA indicated a marginally significant 3-way interaction, F (1) = 3.25, $p > .05$. The analysis revealed that the main effect of participant gender was not significant, F (01) = .404, $p > .05$.

A t-test was used to test the significant differences between mean willingness to forgive (WTF) scores so that the interaction identified by the ANOVA could be interpreted. The t-test examining differences between mean WTF scores for male participants judging unattractive male and female transgressors was significant, t (14) = - 4.61, $p < .05$; however, the t-test examining differences between mean WTF scores for male participants judging attractive male and female transgressors was not significant, t (14) = .740, $p > .05$ (See figure 1). In contrast, for females, the t-test examining differences between mean WTF scores for female participants judging male and female transgressors was significant for unattractive transgressors, t (48) = - 3.23, $p < .05$; and attractive transgressors, t (48) = 5.09, $p < .05$ (See figure 2). Thus, when the transgressor was physically unattractive, men and women both gave an equal advantage to females when forgiving. When the transgressor was physically attractive, men do not seem to care, and they forgive men and women equally, whereas women forgave attractive men significantly more than attractive women.

Discussion

This study examined the effects of participant gender, transgressor gender, and transgressor attractiveness on participant's willingness to forgive. I hypothesized that there would be a main effect for transgressor attractiveness such that, in general, people would be more likely to forgive physically attractive transgressors. I also predicted that men would be more likely than women to forgive attractive transgressors. All other main effects and interactions were exploratory and no predictions were made for them.

I hypothesized that people would be more likely to forgive attractive transgressors. This hypothesis was not supported by the findings. Therefore, although physically attractive people are better liked, viewed more positively, and have more positive characteristics attributed to them than their less attractive counterparts; they are no more likely to be forgiven than their unattractive counterparts.

I also hypothesized that the effect of transgressor attractiveness on forgiveness would depend on both participant gender and transgressor gender. This hypothesis was partially supported. When the transgressor was physically attractive, men forgave male and female transgressors equally, whereas women forgave attractive males significantly more than attractive females. When the transgressor is physically unattractive, men and women both gave an equal advantage to females when forgiving. That is, for physically unattractive transgressors, men and women both forgave female transgressors more than male transgressors. I also hypothesized that men would be more likely to forgive attractive transgressors than would women. This hypothesis was not supported by the findings.

I found it interesting that women were significantly more likely to forgive unattractive women than attractive women and they were significantly more likely to forgive attractive men

than unattractive men. These findings may be interpreting by applying the Self Evaluation Maintenance (SEM) Model. This model assumes that individuals are determined to maintain a positive image of themselves. SEM further assumes that both *reflection processes* (taking pride in a close friend's accomplishments in order to raise one's self-image and combat threats to one's self-esteem) and *comparison processes* (allowing self-esteem to be threatened after being outperformed by a friend) serve to maintain an individual's positive self-image. One of the key factors that determines which process one will use to maintain one's positive self-image after being outperformed by a friend is self-relevance. The comparison process may have been activated for women judging attractive women as a result of a threatened self-esteem (threatened by the transgressor's beauty) where self relevance (gender) was high. One way that people attempt to prevent a loss of self-esteem is by distancing themselves from their friend, which in this case was seen by the female's unwillingness to forgive the transgressor.

There is the possibility that self-esteem may be a mediator variable between a threat to self esteem when self-relevance is high and forgiveness. For instance, threatening situations, in general, may lead to a lower self-esteem, and lower self-esteem may be related to a decrease in forgiveness.

Obtaining a measure of one's perception and evaluation of one's own physical attractiveness and the importance one places on being attractive could be a useful measure for future research in the area of forgiveness. Future research might examine, for instance, whether the effect of transgressor attractiveness on forgiveness also depends on one's perception of their own physical attractiveness. In order to avoid disclosing the hypothesis, it could be extremely useful if this measure were obtained at an earlier point in time than the distribution of the survey. This measure could be obtained in a general questionnaire distributed to students participating in

mass testing early in the semester. I would predict that positive perceptions of ones physical attractiveness would be negatively correlated with ones willingness to forgive a transgressor.

The first notable limitation of this study is the lack of diversity in regards to race/ethnicity of the photos used in the survey. I think that the findings are limited to students similar to the one in the study. More diverse photos may show different results for many reasons. Everyone has a different opinion of what beautiful is. There is much stereotyping for different ethnicities that would influence ones perception of how much to blame that person is for his or her actions, which would also affect the likelihood of forgiving that person. Therefore, future studies are needed to examine a more diverse set of transgressors to ensure that race/ethnicity are not confounding variables of forgiveness.

Aside from participant gender, the study was a within-subjects design, where all participants were exposed to both levels of the independent variable (physical attractiveness; high versus low). All of the unattractive transgressors chosen for the study scored between 2 and 3 for physical attractiveness and the attractive transgressors scored between 7 and 8 for physical attractiveness so that the two levels of the independent variable would not be obviously salient to the participants. Because of these somewhat extreme differences in transgressor attractiveness, it may have been obvious to participants that their reactions to the physical attractiveness of the transgressors were being tested. However, it is likely that the internal validity of the study was threatened by the use of a within subjects design, where results of the study may have been different if the participants were completely unaware of the hypothesis.

Another limitation is the sole reliance on self report measures and hypothetical scenarios. People are not always aware of what their responses would be to real life situations; therefore, their responses to hypothetical scenarios may not reflect real-life processes.

In conclusion, women were significantly more likely to forgive unattractive females than attractive females, which may be the result of an activation of the comparison process within the Self-Evaluation Maintenance (SEM) model. There is the possibility of self-esteem being a mediator variable between an individual who has experienced a threat to their self esteem by a transgressor when self-relevance is high and forgiveness. Obtaining a measure of one's perception and evaluation of their own physical attractiveness could be a useful measure for future research in the area of forgiveness. Limitations of this study include the lack of diversity for the photos used in the survey, the use of a within-subjects study versus between subject's study, the inability to determine a cause-effect relationship using a correlational study, and the sole reliance of self report measures and hypothetical scenarios. There are several ways that future studies could be performed in order to improve on these limitations.

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DeShea, L. (2003). A scenario based scale of willingness to forgive. *Individual Differences Research, 1,* 201-217.

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Appendix

Informed Consent Form

Purpose of study: You are being asked to participate in a study examining forgiveness.

What you will be asked to do: As a participant in this study, you will be asked to complete a survey that will require about 15-20 minutes of your time to complete. You will be asked to read a series of stories and answer some questions indicating your feelings about a person described in the scenarios.

Benefits of the study: Your participation in the study is voluntary. There is no direct benefit of participating in this study. No pay is offered.

Risks: This research involves no foreseeable risks. You are free to skip any questions that you feel uncomfortable answering.

Withdrawal from the study: **Taking part in this study is voluntary.** If the questionnaire causes you psychological or physical discomfort, you may stop your participation immediately.

How the data will be maintained in confidence: **All data collected will be kept confidential**. You will not put your name on your survey; instead, your survey will be identified with a confidential code number. At no time will your name be reported along with your responses to the survey, and this consent form will be kept separate from the survey. Only Dr. Christine Rini and her assistant (Alexandra D'Ambrosio) will have access to a list of names and confidential code numbers, and that information will be kept in a locked office.

If you would like more information about the study, or if you have any questions or concerns about this study or your participation, contact Dr. Christine Rini at (516) 463-6220. **You will be given a copy of this form to keep.**

You are asked to sign this form at the bottom. Please do not write your name on any other page. Thank You for your help.

I understand all of the information above and agree to participate in this study. I acknowledge that I am 18 years of age or older. Please sign both copies of this form, as one will be given to you and the other to the researcher.

Print Name_____ Date_____

Signature_____

Instructions

On the following pages you will be reading four scenarios. Each scenario describes a conflict between a transgressor (a person who behaves badly towards another) and an innocent person affected by the transgressor's bad behavior. Above each scenario will be a photo of the transgressor.

As you read through each scenario, please imagine that you are the innocent person in the scenarios whom the transgressor has treated badly. After reading each scenario you will be asked some questions about your thoughts about the transgressor.

There are no right or wrong answers and you should answer every question, even if you have had no experience with a particular situation.

Scenario 1

You come home from work and catch your roommate looking at your private journal. Your roommate claims to have been looking for a dictionary and really hadn't read much of your journal.

1. How willing would you be to forgive this person? (Circle one)

0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Not at all willing						Completely willing

2. Please indicate your perception of the person shown in the photo by placing a check on one of the seven spaces on each of the pairs of adjectives (descriptive words) presented below.

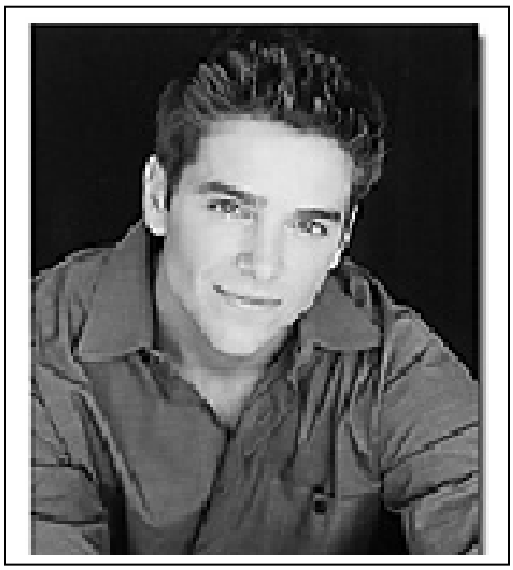
Good _1_:_2_:_3_:_4_:_5_:_6_:_7_ Bad

Sincere _1_:_2_:_3_:_4_:_5_:_6_:_7_ Insincere

Pleasant _1_:_2_:_3_:_4_:_5_:_6_:_7_ Unpleasant

Warm _1_:_2_:_3_:_4_:_5_:_6_:_7_ Cold

Please go on to the next page



Scenario 2

A friend asks to borrow $100 until next month. You agree and make the loan. You wait six weeks, then you ask your friend to repay the debt, but your friend keeps putting it off. Five months later, you still haven't collected the payment.

1. How willing would you be to forgive this person? (Circle one)

0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Not at all willing						Completely willing

2. Please indicate your perception of the person shown in the photo by placing a check on one of the seven spaces on each of the pairs of adjectives (descriptive words) presented below.

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Warm _1_:_2_:_3_:_4_:_5_:_6_:_7_ Cold

Please go on to the next page

Scenario 3

Your good friend invites you to a party where you won't know anyone else. You agreed to meet at the hotel where the party is being held. Your friend says hello to you but then ignores you most of the party. Finally, you just leave.

1. How willing would you be to forgive this person? (Circle one)

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Not at all willing						Completely willing

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Please go on to the next page

Scenario 4

You ask a friend to stay at your home while you are out of town for the week. When you come home, the front door is unlocked and no one is there. When confronted about it, your friend shrugs it off and says nothing happened, so why worry about the door accidentally being left unlocked.

1. How willing would you be to forgive this person? (Circle one)

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Pleasant _1_:_2_:_3_:_4_:_5_:_6_:_7_ Unpleasant

Warm _1_:_2_:_3_:_4_:_5_:_6_:_7_ Cold

Please go on to the next page

Scenario 5

Whenever you see each other, your aunt teases you about your weight. You try to tell her that the teasing bothers you, but she doesn't seem to understand or care, because the comments continue.

1. How willing would you be to forgive this person? (Circle one)

0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Not at all willing						Completely willing

2. Please indicate your perception of the person shown in the photo by placing a check on one of the seven spaces on each of the pairs of adjectives (descriptive words) presented below.

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Warm _1_:_2_:_3_:_4_:_5_:_6_:_7_ Cold

Please go on to the next page

Scenario 6

A friend stops calling you to do things together. You bring it to your friend's attention, and your friend apologized. Then several weeks go by without a phone call, and your phone messages go unanswered. When you finally contact your friend and ask what is going on, your friend gets angry and yells at you to quit being so controlling.

1. How willing would you be to forgive this person? (Circle one)

0	1	2	3	4	5	6
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Scenario 7

Someone who has been a close friend for a number of years goes to live in another city. When you are both in your hometown for a holiday, you call this person on the phone. But your friend says they are too busy to see you and that you are a part of their "old" life.

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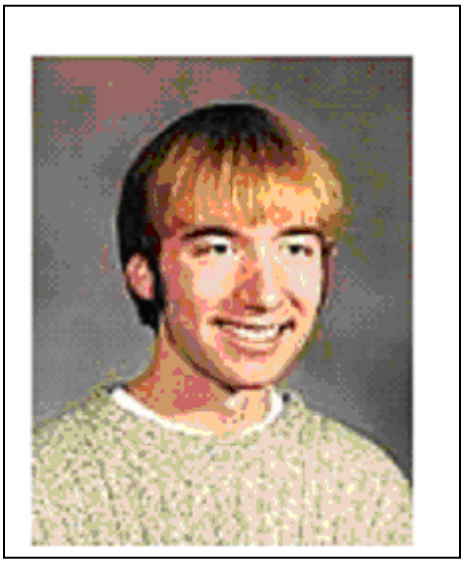
Please go on to the next page



Scenario 8

A co-worker asks you to run a work- related errand, but you are in the middle of another project that you consider more important, and you say so, after your day off, you come back to work and learn from your boss that your co-worker had complained that you were uncooperative and difficult.

1. How willing would you be to forgive this person? (Circle one)

0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Not at all willing						Completely willing

2. Please indicate your perception of the person shown in the photo by placing a check on one of the seven spaces on each of the pairs of adjectives (descriptive words) presented below.

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Sincere _1_ : _2_ : _3_ : _4_ : _5_ : _6_ : _7_ Insincere

Pleasant _1_ : _2_ : _3_ : _4_ : _5_ : _6_ : _7_ Unpleasant

Warm _1_ : _2_ : _3_ : _4_ : _5_ : _6_ : _7_ Cold

Please go on to the next page

Please provide the following information about yourself. Anonymity is completely assured.

1. Age: _____

2. Gender *(check one)*: ___ Male$_0$ ___ Female$_1$

3. Social identity groups (race/ethnicity): *(check one or more terms that you use to identify yourself)*:
___ Latino$_1$
___ American Indian (from any other Americas)$_2$
___ East Asian or Pacific Islander$_3$
___ Other Asian$_4$
___ White$_5$
___ Black/African American$_6$
___ Other$_7$ *(please specify)*: _____

4. What is your current year in college? (*Check one)*
___ Freshman$_1$
___ Sophomore$_2$
___ Junior$_3$
___ Senior$_4$

Thank you for participating

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Interaction between transgressor gender and transgressor attractiveness for the mean forgiveness of male participants.

Figure 2. Interaction between transgressor gender and transgressor attractiveness for the mean forgiveness of female participants.

Figure 1.

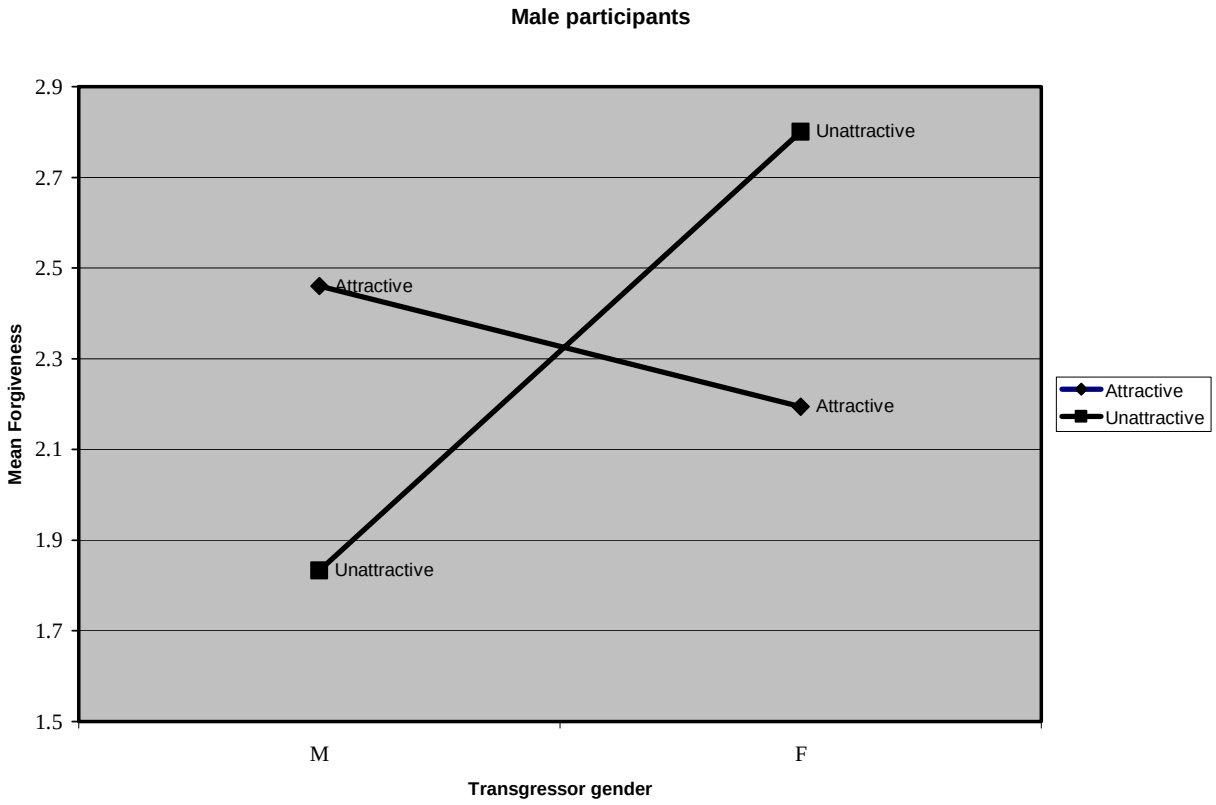
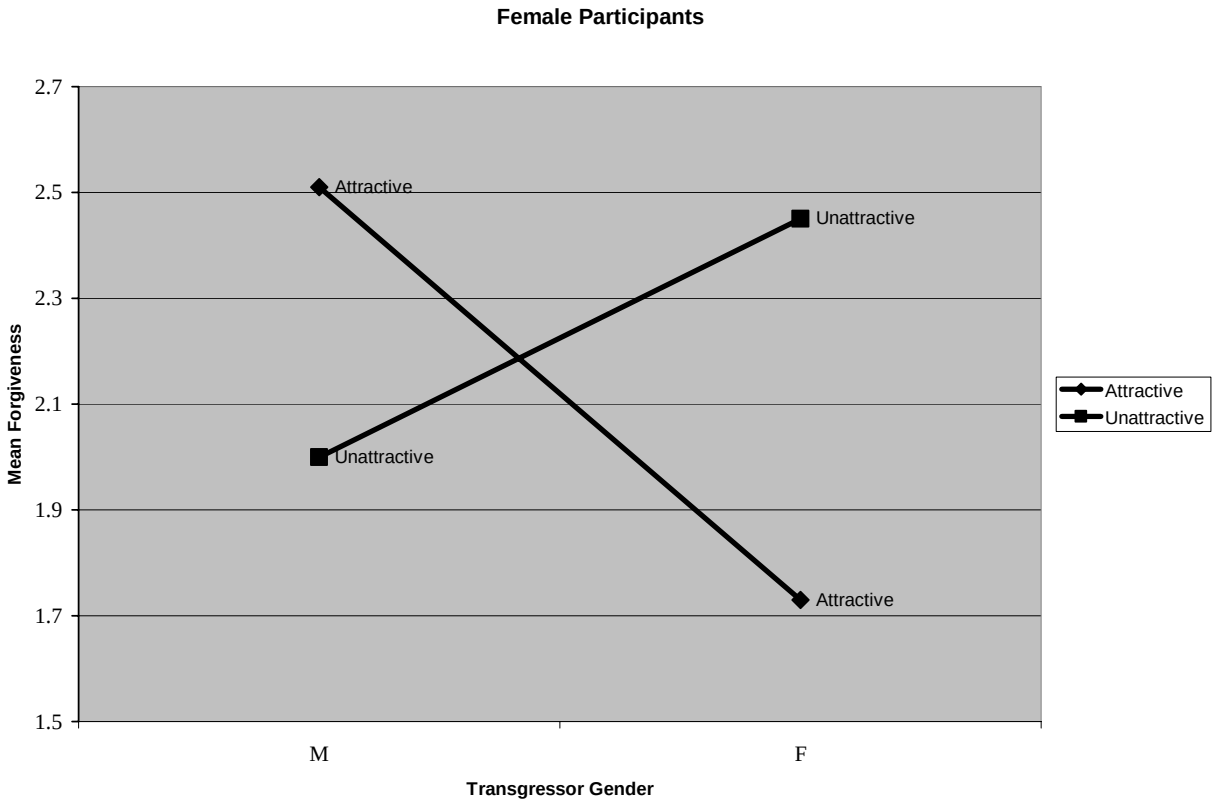

Male participants
2.9
2.7
2.5
2.3
2.1
1.9
1.7
1.5
Mean Forgiveness
Unattractive
Attractive
Attractive
Unattractive
M
F
Transgressor gender
Attractive
Unattractive

Figure 2.


Female Participants
2.7
2.5
2.3
2.1
1.9
1.7
1.5
Mean Forgiveness
Attractive
Unattractive
Unattractive
Attractive
M
F
Transgressor Gender
Attractive
Unattractive