

Perceptions of Competency For Health and Wellness Coaches: The Effect of Initial Impressions of Appearance

Brooke Hershfield & Maia Rumsey

Faculty Sponsor: Justine Vosloo, PhD., CMPC

Background & Purpose

Weight stigma is a prevalent issue in society today, but it is rarely looked at specifically in terms of health and wellness coaches. Weight stigma can be defined as the social devaluation of people perceived to carry excess weight and leads to prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination of these people (Tomiyama, 2014). Overweight people are often viewed as lazy or self-indulgent, and these beliefs may be perpetuated by friends, family, romantic partners, or doctors (Rothblum, 1992). When women, specifically, have knowledge of this bias, it negatively impacts body image and self-reported physical fitness levels (Lavin & Cash, 2000; Schmalz, 2010). This bias and discrimination can impact people professionally in the counseling and health fields. Personnel counseling has been perceived as a field where attractiveness is important, and in studies, an applicants' attractiveness was found to be significant in the hiring decision, expected performance on the job, and perceived job relevant personality traits (Gilmore, Beehr, & Love, 1986). A more attractive clinical psychologist is perceived as more intelligent, assertive, trustworthy, and friendlier and more competent (Cash, Begley, Mccown, & Weise, 1975). While this literature is valuable, there has not been work done specifically with health and wellness coaches.

The purpose of this study is to examine how initial impressions of health and wellness coaches, based solely on appearance, impacted how potential clients rated certain personality traits & job-related abilities.

Methods

A Correlational Cross-Sectional research design was used to examine the effects of appearance on perceptions of health and wellness coach's competence.

- After IRB approval, 28 individuals over the age of 18, who participate in some type of physical activity were recruited through social media and word of mouth.
- After demographic information was gathered (age, sex) participants were randomly shown one of two photos, either the "normal weight" or "overweight" (Larkin & Pines, 1979) health and wellness coaches and given an explanation as to what a health and wellness coach does. Photos were not labeled with any descriptives.
- The participants then filled out the 12-item impression questionnaire followed by the 8-item competence questionnaire for each photo, respectively.
- For the 12-item impression questionnaire participants were asked to rate statements displaying traits like trustworthiness and likability on a 6-point Likert scale. Internal consistency was shown to be good in both photos ($\alpha_{photo1} = .86$, $\alpha_{photo2} = .89$).
- For the 8-item competence questionnaire participants were asked to rate how confident they feel in the health and wellness coach to help with different tasks like goal setting and motivation on a 5-point Likert scale. Internal consistency was shown to be good in both photos ($\alpha_{photo1} = .95$, $\alpha_{photo2} = .92$).

Results

Table I – Descriptive Statistics of Initial Impression & Competency Ratings

	Initial Imp Picture 1	Initial Imp Picture 2	Competency Picture 1	Competency Picture 2
n	23	27	26	27
Mean	3.900	3.983	3.813	4.065
Standard Deviation	0.686	0.600	0.813	0.639

Figure I - Difference between initial impressions for the normal weight (2) and the overweight coach (1)

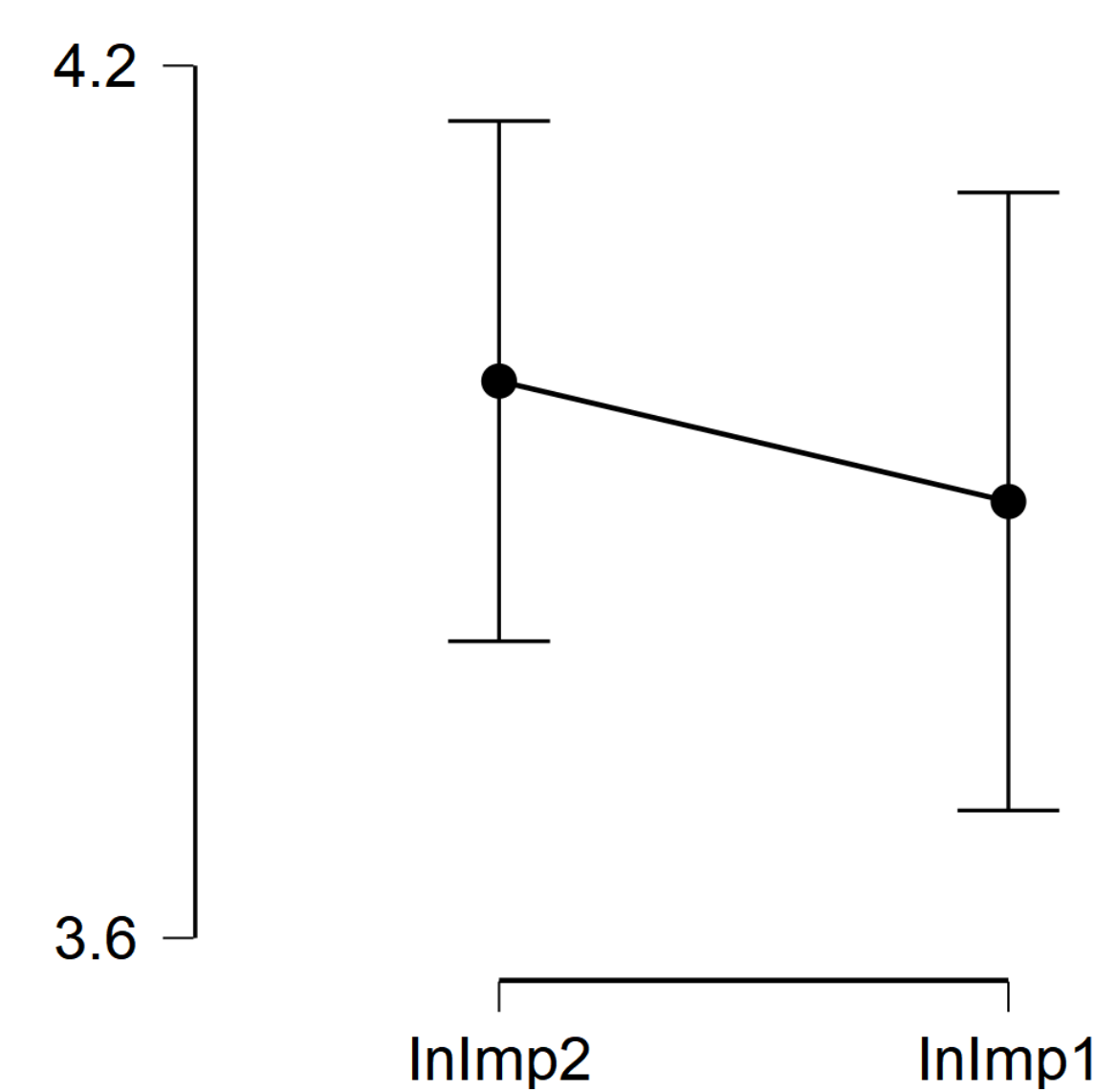


Figure II - Difference between impressions of competency for the normal weight (2) and the overweight coach (1)

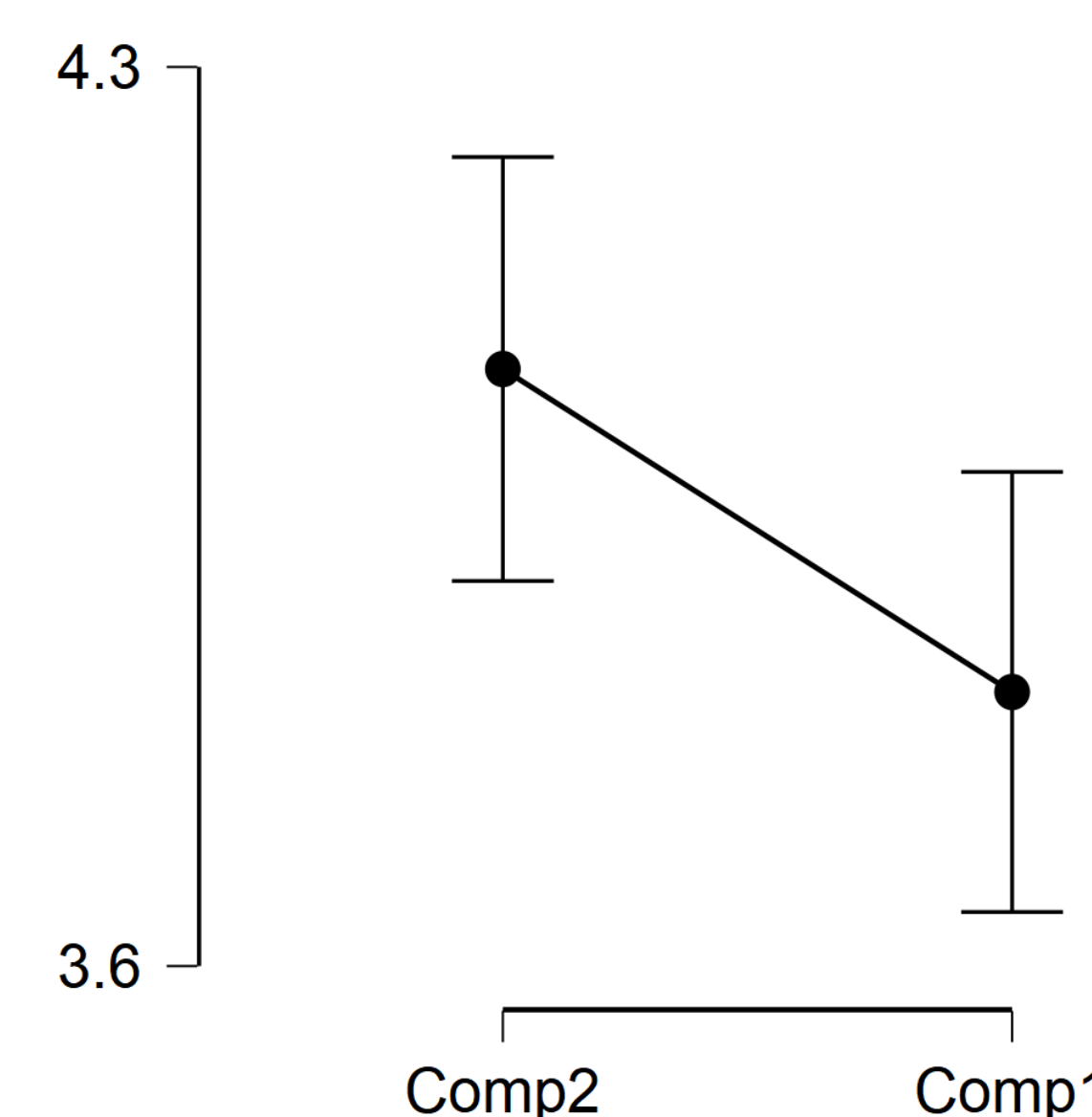


Image I – The photo on the left is of the "overweight" health and wellness coach and the photo on the right is of the "normal weight" health and wellness coach



Picture 1: Overweight coach



Picture 2: Normal weight coach

Discussion & Limitations

- Our results showed that the participants rated the normal weight health and wellness coach higher for both initial impressions and competency, when compared to the overweight health and wellness coach.
- Participants rated the normal weight coach slightly better on overall impressions ($t_{(21)} = .376$, $p = .711$, Cohen's $d = .080$)
- Participants rated the normal weight coach significantly better on constructs related to competency in the field ($t_{(16)} = 2.082$, $p = .048$, Cohen's $d = .416$)
- Weight discrimination is a problem, and the rates of its occurrences have been steadily increasing. Overweight people tend to be viewed as unattractive in our society (Andreyeva, Puhl, & Brownell, 2008).
- Our results are in line with past research. Byrne, London, & Reeves (1968) found that individuals are more likely to assign positive traits to attractive individuals when looking at photographs.
- Green, Cunningham, & Yanico (1996) found that subjects rated attractive professional counselors higher on positive characteristics than unattractive counselors.
- Lewis & Walsh (1978) conducted a study where subjects viewed videotapes of an attractive and an unattractive clinical psychologist. Attractive psychologists were rated higher on numerous characteristics, including competency. The attractive psychologist was viewed as having the potential to be more helpful assisting with certain psychological issues. The control group that only listened to the psychologists speak showed no difference in their ratings of their abilities.
- Limitations of this study include:
 - Small sample size
 - Accidental minor errors on the survey tool
 - The survey was shared on social media platforms, therefore there was no realistic way to control for the physical activity & fitness levels of the participants.

References

- Bryne, D., London, O., & Reeves, K. (1968). The effects of physical attractiveness, sex, and attitude similarity on interpersonal attraction. *Journal of Personality*, 36(2), 259-271.
- Cash, T.F., Begley, P.J., Mccown, D.A., & Weise, B.C. (1975). When counselors are heard but not seen. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 22(4), 273-279.
- Gilmore, D.C., Beehr, T.A., & Love, K.G. (1986). Effects of applicant sex, applicant physical attractiveness, type of rater, and type of job on interview decisions. *Journal of Occupational Psychology*, (59), 103-109
- Green, C.F., Cunningham, J., & Yanico, B.J. (1996). Effect of counselor and subject race and counselor physical attractiveness on impressions and expectations of a female counselor. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 3(33), 349-352.
- Larkin, J.C. & Pines, H.A. (1979). No fat persons need apply: Experimental studies of the overweight stereotype and hiring preference. *Sociology of Work and Occupations*, 3(6), 312-327.
- Lavin, M.A., & Cash, T.F. (2000). Effects of exposure to information about appearance stereotyping and discrimination on women's body images. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 1(29), 51-58.
- Lewis, K.N., & Walsh, W.B. (1978). Physical attractiveness: Its impact on the perception of a female counselor. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 3(25), 210-216.
- Schmalz, D.L. (2010). "I feel fat": Weight-related stigma, body esteem, and BMI as predictors of perceived competence in physical activity. *The European Journal of Obesity*, (3), 15-21.
- Tomiyama, A.J. (2014). Weight stigma is stressful. A review of evidence for the cyclic obesity/weight-based stigma model. *Appetite*, (82), 8-15.