



ARE CHEERLEADERS MORE ATTRACTIVE IN A SQUAD?

\$1.1 million

California

National Science Foundation

In the seventh episode of the fourth season of *How I Met Your Mother*, the character Barney Stinson postulates the “cheerleader effect” is the unusual opening sentence of a federally funded study entitled “Hierarchical Encoding Makes Individuals in a Group Seem More Attractive.”¹⁴⁷

“The Cheerleader Effect occurs when a group of women seems hot but only as a group. Just like with cheerleaders. They seem hot, but take each one of them individually” and they are not, Stinson tells his friends on the television show. “Take a good, hard look at each one of those girls,” he advises, “calling them “sled dogs.”¹⁴⁸

Two male researchers at the University of California conducted a series of experiments to substantiate the so-called “cheerleader effect.”¹⁴⁹ It may sound like a total frat move, but the study is actually the result of research funded by a \$1.1 million grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF).¹⁵⁰

The award abstract for the NSF grant that funded this research, while noting the published study, does not mention anything about perceived attractiveness or even cheerleaders. Instead, NSF claims “this project focuses on the formal design of semi-autonomous automotive Cyber Physical Systems.”¹⁵¹

“As proposed, this effect is not simply that a member of the cheerleading squad, for instance, is more attractive than a person sitting alone in the bleachers (which could be due to factors such as objective attractiveness, altered demeanor, or social signaling), but rather that any given cheerleader will seem more attractive when seen as part of the squad than in isolation,” write the authors of the study.¹⁵²

“We tested this hypothesis in five experiments in which subjects rated the attractiveness of faces presented either alone or in a group with the same gender,” the researchers explain.¹⁵³ “In random order,



The taxpayer funded study confirms the “cheerleader effect,” postulated by Barney Stinson on the television show *How I Met Your Mother*.



This sliding scale between “Unattractive” and “Attractive” was used to rate faces—in a group photo and alone—to confirm the “cheerleader effect,” the perceived attractiveness of a face when seen in a group.

faces “were presented in a group photograph and in isolated portraits cropped from the group photos” or in collages.¹⁵⁴

Over 100 undergraduate students from UCSD received partial course credit for their participation as subjects in the study.¹⁵⁵

“For each experiment, we found 100 group photographs and cropped them to frame the faces of three people of the same gender. We then cropped each individual face to create three portrait images from each group photo. In both experiments, subjects rated the 300 unique faces twice, once in the group photo and once in an isolated portrait. Ratings were made by moving a mouse to set a marker on a continuous scale from unattractive to attractive.”¹⁵⁶

“We found evidence of the cheerleader effect—people seem more attractive in a group than in isolation,” the researchers claim.¹⁵⁷

“Being seen in a group confers an attractiveness benefit that’s roughly enough to bump someone from the 49th percentile to the 51st percentile of attractiveness.”¹⁵⁸

Female faces in a group were rated “5.5 percent of a standard deviation more attractive than those same faces in isolation,” the study found. “This cheerleader effect also held (with surprising consistency in effect size) for male faces: There was an average advantage of 5.6 percent of a standard deviation for faces in a group.”¹⁵⁹

However, “some of our results should give readers pause in accepting our interpretation,” the authors caution, but conclude “the cheerleader effect was robust: Across a wide range of settings, people in groups were rated as more attractive than the same people alone. Thus, having a few wingmen—or wingwomen—may indeed be a good dating strategy, particularly if their facial features complement, and average out, one’s unattractive idiosyncrasies.”¹⁶⁰

“Average faces are more attractive, likely due to the averaging out of unattractive idiosyncrasies,” proposes Drew Walker, the study’s lead author. “Perhaps it’s like Tolstoy’s families: Beautiful people are all alike, but every unattractive person is unattractive in their own way.”¹⁶¹ So the squad goals of a group of friends can be achieved simply by being seen together.

“The effect is definitely small, but some of us need all the help we can get,” jokes Edward Vul, the study’s other author.¹⁶²

Let’s face it, this study is an ugly waste of tax dollars, no matter how you look at it.