

When a Mug Shot is a Glamor Shot The Curious Case of Jeremy Meeks

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As some members of the legal community are aware, last Friday was #FelonCrushFriday. If you are wondering what in the world that means, just Google “Jeremy Meeks.” He is the handsome felon featured last week on the Stockton Police Department Facebook’s page, whose mug shot went viral in a matter of hours, flooding the department’s page with an avalanche of Likes and Comments in a short period of time.

Arrested for weapons charges, Meeks’ mug shot has disarmed his viewers, pun intended. Unwittingly redefining the definition of a “most wanted” criminal, the Stockton Police Department’s Facebook page resulted in Meeks’ mug shot being treated as a glamor shot by admirers all over the world.

Meeks has women throwing themselves at him online from all over the country, posting comments, offers, and solicitations—some of which are too provocative to reprint. Interestingly, however, the fact that Meeks is a convicted felon is not lost on these women. To the contrary, many of the posts include a joking (I hope) desire to be a crime victim if Meeks was the perpetrator.

Good Looks as Evidence?

Will Meeks’ good looks help his case? This is an issue that has stimulated spirited debate within legal circles. Having achieved literal overnight stardom, a status only made possible through social media, Meeks gave a videotaped interview to *USA Today* from jail merely hours after his newfound Internet popularity. In the interview, conducted on the telephone through a glass partition, he denied current involvement in the gang lifestyle. How many times have we seen nondescript, average-looking suspects getting the privilege of giving a videotaped interview with a major newspaper shortly after arrest? Many of you are thinking: *never*.

How then, do we explain the counterintuitive allure of Jeremy Meeks? Or, is there anything counterintuitive at all about the reaction to Meeks’ photo? Welcome to the psychological phenomenon of the halo effect.

The Halo Effect: When Bad Looks Good

In the legal arena, many case results are influenced by the likability and curb appeal of the characters involved. Summed up in two words: jury appeal. The handsome man has an advantage, as does the beautiful woman. But there is more to the halo effect than a stereotypical image that is visually pleasing. Sometimes, good-looking people are clothed with an aura of positive qualities that in reality, they simply don’t have.

The halo effect is a perceptual bias¹ where people equate good looking with good.² People have a tendency to view good looking people in a more positive light than their less-attractive counterparts.³

There are also, however, more specific benefits to being attractive. The halo effect causes people to assume that physically attractive individuals possess a host of positive qualities in other areas,⁴ ranging from trustworthiness, to intelligence, to honesty.

Despite the fact that we tend to assume good things about good-looking people,⁵ however, in reality, these stereotypical beliefs are not accurate in any area.⁶

The Beautiful, and the Benefit of the Doubt

I have a career's worth of first hand experience prosecuting good looking criminals—from handsome thieves and gang members to beautiful schoolteachers who were having sex with their pre-pubescent students. Sometimes, jurors give these criminal defendants a break.

Why? Because sometimes, unfortunately, bad people look very good—and reap the associated benefits. People who are attractive, articulate, and charismatic, often also receive the benefit of the doubt.

We live in a society that puts a premium on good looks—often to the exclusion of much more relevant factors. But research shows that when jurors find out that a good-looking criminal used her good looks in facilitating a crime, they will meet out the justice deserved.

In a study aptly entitled “Beautiful but Dangerous,” researchers found granting leniency to a good looking suspect was correlated with whether or not she *used* her attractiveness to enable her to commit the crime.⁷

Beauty is in the Eye of the Community

Despite the curb appeal of the Meeks mug shot, the fact that beauty is only skin deep was not lost on Stockton residents.

Judging by the geography of his cadre of admirers, Meeks is better looking the farther away from him you are. Stockton locals shared that when they look at this man's photo they don't see handsome mug, they see thug. Because Meeks is a criminal. And as one Stockton woman explained, “criminals aren't sexy.”

¹. Judee K. Burgoon, Laura K. Guerrero, and Kory Floyd, *Nonverbal Communication* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2010), 83.

². Viren Swami and Adrian Furnham, *The Psychology of Physical Attraction* (London: Routledge, 2008), 11.

³. Judith H. Langlois, Lisa Kalakanis, Adam J. Rubenstein, Andrea Larson, Monica Hallam, and Monica Smoot, "Maxims or Myths of Beauty? A Meta-Analytic and Theoretical Review," *Psychological Bulletin* 126, no. 3 (2000): 390-423.

⁴. Laura K. Guerrero and Kory Floyd, *Nonverbal Communication in Close Relationships* (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006), 58.

⁵. Schneider, Frank W., Jamie A. Gruman, and Larry M. Coutts. *Applied Social Psychology: Understanding and Addressing Social and Practical Problems* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2005), 82.

⁶. Schneider et al., *Applied Social Psychology*, 82.

⁷. Harold Sigall and Nancy Ostrove, "Beautiful but Dangerous: Effects of Offender

Attractiveness and Nature of the Crime on Juridic Judgment," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 31, no. 3 (1975): 410-14.