The International Journal of Indian Psychology
ISSN 2348-5396 (Online) | ISSN: 2349-3429 (Print)
Volume 13, Issue 3, July- September, 2025
DIP: 18.01.013.20251303, DOI: 10.25215/1303.013
https://www.ijip.in

Research Paper

The Influence of Familiarity on Preference and Trait Judgments: Investigating the Mere Exposure and Halo Effects in Visual Judgments

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the Mere Exposure Effect and the Halo Effect by examining how repeated exposure to images influences preference ratings and unrelated trait judgments. Forty-one postgraduate students participated in a within-subjects experiment where high- and low-exposure images were rated based on preference and visual quality. High-exposure images received significantly higher ratings, supporting the hypothesis that familiarity enhances both liking and positive trait evaluation. Paired sample t-tests revealed significant differences between conditions, with medium to large effect sizes. These findings highlight the role of familiarity in shaping perceptual judgments and have implications in various areas like hiring, advertising, branding, and UI/UX design.

Keywords: *Mere Exposure Effect, Halo Effect, familiarity, visual preference, trait judgment*

The Mere Exposure Effect, first introduced by Robert Zajonc in 1968, refers to the psychological phenomenon in which repeated exposure to a stimulus increases an individual's preference for it. This effect is particularly pronounced when the exposure is subtle and unconscious. Empirical studies support this, showing that stimuli presented repeatedly—whether objects, faces, or abstract images—tend to be rated more favourably than those seen only once (Bornstein et al., 1989). Recent research further supports this notion; for example, Van Dessel, Mertens, Smith, and De Houwer (2017) demonstrated that mere exposure effects can be elicited even through instructional suggestions without actual stimulus repetition. Yagi, Ikeda, and Kita (2020) extended this by showing that the effect depends on the relative salience of the stimulus — that is, stimuli exposed more frequently in a given context are liked more intensely, not only in terms of preference but also emotional intensity. Additionally, studies have shown that this effect can persist despite mood variations (Mertens et al., 2024), significantly shaping implicit evaluations formed outside of conscious awareness and influence the development of automatic preferences over time (Mertens et al., 2024).

In a similar vein, the Halo Effect describes a cognitive bias in which familiarity with a stimulus influences broader judgments about unrelated traits, such as trustworthiness or attractiveness (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). For example, research has shown that people are

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Received: June 06, 2025; Revision Received: July 08, 2025; Accepted: July 12, 2025

more likely to judge individuals as trustworthy based on how familiar they appear (Willis & Todorov, 2006). Gabrieli et al. (2021) demonstrated that the halo effect remains robust even under societal stressors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting its generalizability across different cultural and situational contexts. Furthermore, Lenoir and Stocks (2020) found that physical attractiveness biases extend into moral and behavioural judgments, with attractive individuals more likely to be seen as norm-conforming compared to unattractive ones. This aligns with findings by Gulati et al. (2024), who showed that beauty filters significantly boosted ratings of not just attractiveness, but also perceived intelligence and trustworthiness — confirming the continued relevance of the halo effect in digital environments. Similarly, recent reviews of recruitment practices highlight that the halo effect may lead employers to favour candidates based on visual impressions or perceived prestige, rather than functional skills (Business Insider, 2024).

More recent studies have extended these findings, particularly in digital and visual media contexts. For instance, Montoya et al. (2021) found that users rated social media avatars more positively when repeatedly exposed, even without interacting with them. Similarly, Park, J. Y., Park, K., & Dubinsky, A. J. (2011) demonstrated that exposure to retailer images significantly influenced consumers' attitudes toward private brands. This study emphasized the role of the Halo Effect in shaping perceptions, showing how brand familiarity can bias attitudes toward unrelated product attributes, further supporting the generalizability of the Halo Effect to consumer psychology (Park et al., 2011).

In this experiment, participants were exposed to two sets of images—high-exposure images, shown repeatedly, and low-exposure images, shown infrequently. In the Exposure Phase, participants viewed these images without making any judgments. In the Judgment Phase, participants rated the images based on preference and trait (quality).

The Mere Exposure Effect suggests that repeated exposure will lead to higher preference ratings, while the Halo Effect predicts that familiar images will also be rated more favourably on unrelated traits. By comparing ratings between high- and low-exposure images, this study aims to further explore how familiarity influences both preference judgments and broader trait evaluations, contributing to our understanding of cognitive biases like the Mere Exposure and Halo Effects.

The experiment was conducted using PsychoPy, an open-source Python-based software widely used for cognitive and behavioural research. PsychoPy’s precise control over stimulus presentation and response recording ensured accuracy in measuring participant responses.

Aim

To examine whether repeated exposure to images (Mere Exposure Effect) influences both preference ratings and unrelated trait judgments (Halo Effect).

Hypotheses

- Images viewed more frequently by participants will receive higher ratings of preference.
- Familiar images (those seen more often) will receive higher ratings on unrelated traits, such as quality (visual appeal)

Independent Variables (IV):
- Exposure frequency (high exposure vs. low exposure).

Dependent Variables (DV):
- Preference ratings (for Mere Exposure Effect).
- Ratings of specific traits (for Halo Effect).

Operational Definitions
- **Mere Exposure Effect**: Operationalized by the frequency of image presentation (high exposure: 8 repetitions, low-exposure: 1 repetition) and measured through preference ratings in the Judgment Phase.
- **Halo Effect**: Operationalized by trait ratings (e.g., quality) of images based on exposure frequency, with higher ratings for high-exposure images. \
- **Exposure Conditions**: Defined as high-exposure (8 repetitions) and low-exposure (1 repetition) during the Exposure Phase.
- **Preference Ratings**: The participants' preference for images based on familiarity. Measured using a Likert scale to assess how much participants like the image based on their first impressions.
- **Trait Judgment (Quality)**: The subjective rating of how visually appealing or attractive participants find each image. This is measured on a Likert scale. The higher the rating, the more appealing or attractive the image is perceived to be.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants in this experiment consisted of 41 postgraduate students aged between 20 and 25 years. Participants were recruited using a convenience sampling method, drawing from a pool of students readily available to the researcher. All participants had normal or corrected to-normal vision and were computer-literate, ensuring they could effectively engage with the experimental tasks. Participants were selected based on the inclusion criteria, which required no prior exposure to the stimuli used in the experiment.

As the study followed a within-subjects design, each participant completed both the Mere Exposure phase and the Halo Effect phase, ensuring consistency in the data collected across all participants. This design minimized variability related to individual differences in preferences, perceptual styles, and rating tendencies, ensuring consistency in the data collected across all participants.

Exclusion Criteria
- Participants who have regularly watched anime, Japanese movies, or read manga were excluded from the study to avoid any bias from prior familiarity with the stimuli
- Individuals with any visual impairments or conditions that could impact their ability to view or distinguish the images were excluded.
- Participants who did not complete the experiment in full, or whose data were incomplete due to technical issues, were excluded from the final analysis.

Material/Tool/Equipment

The tools used in the Mere Exposure Effect and Halo Effect experiment included PsychoPy software (version 2024.1.5), which was utilized to design, present, and record responses for both the exposure and judgment phases. The experiment was conducted on standard desktop

PCs running Windows 11, with a screen resolution of 1600 x 900 pixels to ensure consistent and accurate presentation of stimuli across all participants.

The visual stimuli consisted of 15 low-exposure images (seen once during the exposure phase), 5 high-exposure images (repeated eight times during the exposure phase), and an additional 15 new low-exposure images introduced specifically in the trait judgment phase. The stimuli used in the experiment were pictograms sourced from the Experience Japan Pictograms collection, developed by Nippon Design Center, Inc., and used in accordance with their Terms of Use. Pictograms were chosen for their cultural neutrality and minimal association with prior experiences, reducing the likelihood of bias. All stimuli were standardized in terms of size, brightness, and resolution to control for perceptual differences. A pilot study with 10 participants was conducted to ensure that the selected high- and low-exposure images were comparable in terms of general visual appeal and recognizability before repeated exposure was manipulated. This procedure ensured that any observed differences in ratings could be attributed to exposure frequency rather than inherent variations in image quality.

The new low-frequency images were added in the Trait Judgment phase to avoid bias from prior exposure. Since the low-frequency images were shown twice (in the Exposure and Mere Judgment phases), introducing new ones helped ensure that any differences in ratings were due to familiarity rather than repeat exposure. This design allows for a more robust comparison of how familiarity influences trait judgments, ensuring that the Halo Effect is not confounded by exposure bias. A Likert scale was used in the judgment phase to allow participants to rate their preference and trait impressions (e.g., trustworthiness, quality). This setup ensured reliable data collection, standardized presentation, and precise recording of participant responses across both experimental phases.

Procedure

The procedure for the Mere Exposure Effect and Halo Effect experiment was carefully designed and implemented using PsychoPy software, version 2024.1.5, on standard desktop PCs to ensure consistent visual presentation across all trials. The experiment was designed to examine the effects of repeated exposure to images on both preference ratings (Mere Exposure Effect) and trait judgments (Halo Effect).

Pilot Study

Before conducting the main experiment, a pilot study was carried out with 10 participants to test the experimental design, timing, and ensure the stimuli were appropriate for the main experiment. The pilot study helped refine the procedure and assess effect sizes, ensuring the study was adequately powered.

Phase 1: Exposure Phase

Participants were exposed to 5 high-frequency images (each repeated 8 times) and 15 low frequency images (each shown once). Each image was displayed for 1.5 seconds, with a brief interval between images to avoid cognitive overload. High-frequency images were presented repeatedly, while low-frequency images were shown only once to establish a contrast for later comparisons. The order of the images was randomized within each exposure category (high frequency and low-frequency) to reduce predictability and potential bias.

Phase 2: Judgment Phase (Preference Ratings & Halo Effect)
In this phase, participants rated each image on two separate occasions:

- Part 1 (Preference Ratings for Mere Exposure Effect): Participants rated their preference for the images they had previously seen in the exposure phase. Ratings were made on a Likert scale, reflecting how much they liked or preferred each image.
- Part 2 (Trait Judgments for Halo Effect): Participants rated the 5 repeated high frequency images from the exposure phase along with 15 new low-frequency images they had not seen before, on unrelated traits such as quality. These ratings were also made on a Likert scale, reflecting their trait impressions.

For each image, the presentation order was randomized to prevent order effects. Each image was displayed for 1.5 seconds and the next image was shown only after the participant had completed the rating. Participants were instructed to provide ratings based on their initial impressions rather than overthinking their responses.

After completing Part 1 (Mere Exposure Ratings), participants were given a short break to minimize fatigue and refresh their focus before proceeding to Part 2 (Halo Effect Ratings). A message instructed participants to relax for 10 seconds, and they could proceed by pressing the space bar, giving them control over when to continue.

Upon completing both parts of the judgment phase, participants were shown a final message thanking them for their participation. All data, including preference ratings and trait judgments, were automatically saved for later analysis.

Administration
The system was ensured to be functioning properly before the experiment began. Instructions were displayed first to familiarize participants with the task. As it was a self-administered test, data was saved automatically after each participant completed their individual session. Prior to starting, the experimenter also confirmed that the mouse was fully operational and guided participants on how to use it for responding.

Instructions
Before starting the experiment, participants were given clear instructions about the two main phases: Exposure Phase and Judgment Phase. In the Exposure Phase, they were asked to observe images displayed briefly without providing any responses. In the Judgment Phase, participants rated the images in two parts: Preference Ratings, where they indicated how much they liked each image, and Trait Ratings, where they evaluated unrelated traits such as how visually appealing the image was (quality). Ratings were made using a mouse to select their responses on an on-screen scale. Participants were encouraged to rely on their immediate impressions and informed they could ask the experimenter for clarification before proceeding and they were assured that their results would remain confidential and that they could withdraw at any time. Once ready, they pressed the space bar to begin.

PRECAUTIONS

- All phases, including the image presentation and rating scales, were pre-programmed in PsychoPy to ensure consistency and reliability.
- To avoid potential data errors, precautions were taken, such as ensuring no spaces in file names and restricting responses to designated ones.

- Carefully randomized and tested the presentation order of high and low-exposure images in both the exposure and judgment phases to ensure proper functioning and to prevent any order-related biases
- Verified all setup components, including display settings and response logging, before each session to prevent technical difficulties during data collection.

Ethical Consideration

- Ensured the confidentiality of the participants.
- Obtained informed consent from each participant prior to their involvement in the experiment.
- Informed participants that they have the right to withdraw from the experiment at any time without any consequences.
- Ensured ethical use of the stimuli by sourcing the pictograms from the Experience Japan Pictograms collection, developed by Nippon Design Center, Inc., and using them in accordance with the Terms of Use, which permit non-modified use for academic purposes.
- Stored all data in a password-protected file to ensure its security

Table 1: Overview of Stimuli Used Across Phases, Including Exposure Frequency, Image Type, and Phase-Specific Details

Stimulus Type	Exposure Frequency	Phase	Number of Images	Description
High-Exposure Images	8 repetitions	Exposure	5	Images shown repeatedly
Low-Exposure Images	1 repetition	Exposure	15	Images shown once
High-Exposure Images	8 repetitions	Preference	5	Same as Exposure Phase
Low-Exposure Images	1 repetition	Preference	15	Same as Exposure Phase
High-Exposure Images	8 repetitions	Trait Judgment	5	Same as earlier phases
Low-Exposure (New) Images	1 repetition	Trait Judgment	15	Newly introduced images

Table 2: Group Characteristics of Participants

Characteristics	Details
Gender	Male: 30, Female: 11
Educational Status	Post-graduation (ongoing)
Qualification	Graduation
Computer Literacy	Advanced
Colour Blindness	No
Total Participants	41

Statistical Analyses

The data collected from the participants were analysed using SPSS. A pilot study was conducted to assess the effectiveness of the experimental design and to determine the necessary sample size for reliable results. Normality of the data was assessed using descriptive statistics and the Shapiro-Wilk test. Since normality was met, parametric tests were deemed appropriate. Paired sample t-tests were conducted to compare the mean ratings of high- and low-exposure images in both the Mere Exposure and Halo Effect phases.

RESULTS

The aim of the study was to investigate the Mere Exposure Effect and the Halo Effect by examining how repeated exposure to images influences both preference ratings and unrelated trait judgments.

A pilot study with 10 participants was conducted to refine the procedure and ensure the stimuli were effective. The results from the pilot study indicated that Cohen's d for the Mere Exposure Effect (high vs. low exposure) was $d = 0.62$, and for the Halo Effect, $d = 0.58$, demonstrating medium to large effect sizes.

Assumptions of Normality and Parametric Tests

Normality for each condition was assessed using descriptive statistics and the Shapiro-Wilk test. In the Mere Exposure phase, normality was met for both high-exposure ($W = .976$, $p = .523$) and low-exposure ($W = .971$, $p = .365$) conditions, indicating that the data for both conditions followed a normal distribution. Similarly, in the Halo Effect phase, the assumption of normality was met for both high-exposure ($W = .972$, $p = .404$) and low-exposure ($W = 981$, $p = .723$) conditions, suggesting that these datasets were also normally distributed. Since normality was satisfied across all conditions, parametric tests were deemed appropriate. Specifically, for the paired-samples t-test, the normality assumption was verified on the difference scores between paired observations using the Shapiro-Wilk test, with all p-values exceeding .05, supporting the use of this test.

Although the dependent variables- preference ratings and trait judgments - were measured on Likert scales, parametric tests are widely accepted for Likert scales with five or more points, particularly when normality is confirmed.

Regarding independence, each pair of observations (i.e., phase 1 and phase 2 scores from the same participant) was independent from other pairs within the within-subjects design, fulfilling the independence assumption required for the paired t-test. Furthermore, no extreme outliers were detected in the difference scores, further supporting the suitability of parametric analysis.

Inferential Statistics

Paired *t*-tests were used to compare the means of ratings between high- and low-exposure images in both the Mere Exposure and Halo Effect phases.

Mere Exposure Effect (Phase 1): Participants rated high-exposure images (M = 3.59, SD = 0.49) significantly higher than low-exposure images (M = 3.27, SD = 0.31), $t(40) = 5.46$, $p < .001$.

Halo Effect (Phase 2): Participants rated high-exposure images (M = 3.28, SD = 0.42) significantly higher than low-exposure images (M = 2.98, SD = 0.30), $t(40) = 4.28$, $p < .001$. These results demonstrate that both repeated exposure and familiarity significantly increased both preference and trait ratings, supporting the hypotheses.

Table 3: Group-Level Mean Ratings and Standard Deviations for High- and Low-Exposure Images Across Preference and Trait (Quality) Judgments

Rating Type	**Exposure Type**	***M***	***SD***
Preference (Mere Exposure)	High Exposure	3.59	0.49
	Low Exposure	3.27	0.31
Quality (Halo Effect)	High Exposure	3.28	0.42
	Low Exposure	2.98	0.30

Table 4: Paired t-test Results Comparing High-Exposure and Low-Exposure Conditions for Preference and Trait (Quality) Ratings

Rating Type	***N***	***M***	***SD***	***t***
Preference (Mere Exposure)	41	0.32	0.38	5.457
Quality (Halo Effect)	41	0.30	0.44	4.279

Note. Both comparisons were statistically significant at $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to investigate the Mere Exposure Effect and the Halo Effect by examining how repeated exposure to images influences both preference ratings and unrelated trait judgments. The results demonstrated that participants rated high-exposure images more favourably than low-exposure images in both phases, supporting the hypothesis that increased exposure leads to higher preference ratings and more positive trait judgments.

The findings of the Mere Exposure Effect are consistent with previous research (Zajonc, 1968), where repeated exposure to stimuli increases preference, even without detailed evaluation. Similarly, this study aligns with more recent research such as Montoya et al. (2017), who found that repeated exposure to unfamiliar faces and avatars in digital environments increased their likability. Yagi, Ikeda, and Kita (2020) further explain this through the salience theory, suggesting that relative exposure within a context amplifies both preference and emotional intensity. Additionally, Van Dessel, Mertens, Smith, and De Houwer (2017) showed that mere exposure can shape attitudes even through instructions, without actual stimulus repetition. These results can also be interpreted through the lens of cognitive fluency theory, which posits that stimuli processed more easily—due to repetition—are perceived more positively. The familiarity induced by repeated exposure reduces cognitive effort, which in turn elicits a more favourable evaluative response. The current results resonate with these findings, indicating that preference judgments can be shaped not only by frequency of exposure but also by how stimuli are cognitively framed.

The Halo Effect observed here also reflects findings by Park et al. (2011), where familiarity with brand images influenced broader trait perceptions like quality and trustworthiness. Gabrieli et al. (2021) similarly demonstrated the robustness of the halo effect during the COVID-19 pandemic across cultures, and Lenoir and Stocks (2020) highlighted that physical attractiveness can bias moral and behavioural expectations. The present findings may be further explained by affective priming mechanisms, whereby repeated exposure generates a positive emotional tone that subsequently influences trait judgments. This emotional familiarity can extend to domains such as trustworthiness, competence, or quality even when those traits are not directly observable. These parallels reinforce the idea that perceived familiarity or attractiveness can trigger automatic positive evaluations across diverse domains. The current study therefore extends these established effects to image judgments, reinforcing the idea that familiarity fosters positive evaluations.

The pilot study, which included 10 participants, was conducted to determine the appropriate sample size for the main experiment. The pilot results revealed medium to large effect sizes for both the Mere Exposure and Halo Effect, which were used to calculate the necessary sample size for reliable results.

Importantly, no signs of response inconsistency or fatigue effects were observed in the data. The mean ratings and standard deviations remained consistent across both phases, with high exposure images consistently receiving higher ratings than low-exposure images. The standard deviations were relatively small, indicating that responses were stable across participants, and there was no notable trend of increasing or decreasing ratings that could suggest shifts in engagement, response patterns over time, or decreased attention and effort due to fatigue. This further supports the robustness of the Mere Exposure and Halo Effects without confounding influences from such factors.

However, the study did not assess the temporal stability of the observed effects, leaving open the question of whether preferences or trait judgments persist over time or diminish with prolonged exposure. Additionally, the study used a limited set of stimuli, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other types of visual content. Future studies could benefit from using longitudinal designs to explore how the Mere Exposure and Halo Effects evolve over time. It would also be valuable to experiment with different types of visual stimuli (e.g., faces, logos, abstract art, landscapes) to test for generalization and moderating variables.

The findings indicates that the observed effects of mere exposure and the halo effect are fundamental cognitive processes that occur naturally in everyday life and underscore the potential for familiarity to influence judgments in everyday contexts—whether in consumer decisions, media evaluations, or social impressions. For example, Gulati et al. (2024) showed that beauty filters enhance not only perceived attractiveness but also intelligence and trustworthiness, highlighting the implications of repeated exposure to curated images in digital media. Similarly, Business Insider (2024) reported that halo effects in hiring can bias decision-making toward candidates based on visual impressions rather than actual qualifications. This has practical implications in areas like advertising, UI/UX design, and political communication, where repeated exposure can shape user attitudes and perceptions.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the mean ratings for high-exposure images were significantly higher than those for low-exposure images in both the Mere Exposure and Halo Effect phases, supporting the hypotheses. These findings confirm that repeated exposure to images not only increases preference ratings (Mere Exposure Effect) but also leads to more favourable trait judgments (Halo Effect), illustrating the impact of familiarity on cognitive evaluations.

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Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Krishnan, M. (2025). The Influence of Familiarity on Preference and Trait Judgments: Investigating the Mere Exposure and Halo Effects in Visual Judgments. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, *13*(3)*,* 128-137. DIP:18.01.013.20251303, DOI:10.25215/1303.013