

## The Beauty Premium in the Academic World: A Cross-Cultural Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

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A majority of studies on the beauty premium of college professors have been conducted in Western countries, mainly in the United States and Canada. The present paper focuses on the influence of professors' physical attractiveness on their teaching ratings awarded by three ethno-cultural student populations (native Israelis, FSU immigrants, and Ethiopian immigrants) at a large public college in Israel. We asked the participants to look at photographs of attractive professors (rated in a previous study) and rate the quality of their teaching, based solely on the photographs. It was found that both female and male professors were awarded a beauty premium by all three groups. Our findings confirm results of previous studies in USA and Germany, which suggested that the beauty premium exists across diverse ethnic groups. Our conclusions are based mainly on findings that were obtained from Christian or Jewish subjects. A more comprehensive examination could include additional cultures and religions, such as Moslem or Buddhist participants. Therefore, we would welcome collaboration with colleagues who are interested in examining this phenomenon in their own countries. Our conclusion may have practical implications when evaluating employees' performance in the globalized multicultural workforce in general, and in intercultural academic settings in particular.

**Keywords:** teaching ratings, beauty premium, cross-cultural perspective, student satisfaction, evaluation bias.

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### Introduction

Beauty, attractiveness, and sexiness are traits that go hand in hand with stereotypes associated with outward appearance. Beautiful people are perceived to be richer, more successful, and more reliable than their less attractive counterparts (Wilson & Eckel, 2006). People who are physically attractive are perceived by society as having greater capacity for cooperation and for offering assistance (Dobson, 2007). Physical attractiveness evokes positive feelings among others (Aharon et al., 2001): Attractive people make others act more openly (Brundage, Derlaga, & Cash, 1977), can make others change their opinions (Cialdini, 1995), and can elicit a greater amount of trust (Wilson & Eckel, 2006). In a study by Berggren, Jordahl, & Poutvaara (2006), it was found that beauty accounts for a large part of electoral success.

The influence of outward appearances has not eluded the academic world. Feeley (2002) found significant

relationships among instructors' level of attractiveness and vocal clarity, and dimensions such as teaching effectiveness, affective learning, and nonverbal immediacy. Kindred & Mohammed (2005) analyzed assigned scores, and content-analyzed the comments of a sample of 1,054 ratings from the [www.ratemyprofessors.com](http://www.ratemyprofessors.com) website. They found a correlation between appearance ratings and clarity of 0.34. Hamermesh & Parker (2005) examined the impact of instructors' looks on their instructional ratings in the courses that they teach. They found that measures of perceived beauty have a substantial independent positive impact on instructional ratings by undergraduate students.

The impact of beauty on instructional ratings was statistically significant for both women and men, but was three times greater for male than for female faculty. Sussmuth (2006) followed the strategy of Hamermesh and Parker, and examined whether perceived attractiveness of German university teachers was correlated with the ratings they received

from students. He asked 50 students to assess the attractiveness of 50 tenured and non-tenured teaching staff members of a second German university. He found that the impact of teachers' looks on their average instructional ratings was about one-half the magnitude of that found in the American university studied by Hamermesh and Parker. Felton, Mitchell, & Stinson (2004) analyzed data from *ratemyprofessors.com* for associations among perceived quality, easiness, and "hotness" scores. *RateMyProfessors.com* is one of the largest websites that allow students to post anonymous ratings of college professors in the United States and Canada. Students rate professors on three dimensions (easiness, helpfulness, and clarity of teaching). In addition, students can rate attractiveness by assigning a "chili pepper" icon to indicate hotness, a concept generally understood as the physical attractiveness of the instructor.

The researchers examined ratings of 3,190 professors and found a correlation of 0.30 between quality and hotness. Felton, Koper, Mitchell & Stinson (2008) elaborated the measurement of hotness and extended the previous work of Felton et al. (2004). Their database included 6,852 faculty from 369 institutions from U.S. and Canada, who got at least 20 ratings in *ratemyprofessors.com*; it should be noted that only few social researchers have an access to such a large data base. Therefore, this project may be considered as a landmark study in the field of teaching ratings. Accordingly, their improved analysis revealed a correlation of 0.84 between quality and hotness, i.e. twice as high as the correlation reported in Felton et al. (2004). Bokek-Cohen & Davidovich (2008a) expected that this association would differ for female and male students. Their study showed the interesting result that male lecturers who received high attractiveness ratings were also rated high on instructional quality by female students, but not by male

students. In contrast, female instructors who received high attractiveness ratings were not awarded high ratings on professional proficiency by students of either sex. The researchers hypothesized that the "beauty premium" influences professors' evaluations when gender image and role image are compatible.

Gillen (1981) suggested that attractiveness enhances gender characterizations. Thus, attractive female professors are perceived to be more feminine, and attractive male professors are viewed to be more masculine, than their less attractive counterparts. Based on Gillen's thesis, Bokek-Cohen and Davidovich (2008b) conducted a comparative study and examined the beauty premium awarded to women in two occupations: college professor and clerk. While attractive female clerks received higher performance evaluations, beautiful female professors received similar ratings to those of their less attractive counterparts. Attractive female instructors work at a masculinely sex-typed job, and their exaggerated feminine attributes (e.g., beauty) are incongruent with those believed necessary for their job. This perceived incongruence (which was found to be stronger among men who endorse traditional gender stereotypes) is distinct from the inverse relationship between perceived beauty and talent for women, which is raised in Holahan & Stephan's study (1981). In contrast to attractive female professors, attractive female clerks work at a femininely sex-typed job, and their exaggerated feminine attributes are congruent with those believed necessary for their job. The researchers concluded that the beauty premium influenced students' ratings of instructors where gender image and role image was compatible.

Most studies on physical attractiveness have been conducted in Western countries, mainly in the United States and Canada, and few studies on the

influence of the beauty premium have been conducted in non-Western cultures outside the United States. The majority of studies focus on the criteria of beauty, rather than the advantages ascribed to beautiful people. These studies arrived at the conclusion that the parameters of beauty are universal (Gangestad & Scheyd, 2005) and what is considered beautiful is not dependent on culture (Cunningham et al., 1995).

As a result of changes in societal structure and the emergence of the “global village”, it has become essential to understand the beauty premium and specifically, how the beauty premium functions in non-Western societies that maintain interactions with the Western world. Little is known of the influence of an employee's physical appearance on different aspects of the cross-cultural labor market. Several studies have addressed this issue in an effort to compare the beauty premium in the West and the East. For example, Shahani-Denning & Dudhat (2003) compared the influence of external appearance in Indian society and American society. The researchers presented the participants with photographs of potential candidates and asked them to rate candidates' attractiveness, the probability of being hired, and their wages. Findings show that Indians were more strongly influenced by external appearance when attributing higher wages.

One of the more popular claims in socio-cultural and intercultural studies is that physical attractiveness stereotypes (PAS) exist mainly in individualistic Western societies, while collectivist societies tend to label individuals according to group membership (Dion, 1986). Studies have confirmed this claim. For example, Dion and others (1990) found that Chinese students were less influenced by PAS when evaluating personal traits, but not when evaluating expected life outcomes. Moreover, the researchers found that high

involvement in Chinese community life leads students to award more positive evaluations to less physically attractive people.

In spite of these results, several researchers claim that the findings do not conclusively prove that collectivist societies are not influenced by external appearance. Chen and others (1997) sought to investigate this claim when they compared the influence of beauty on evaluations of personal traits by American and Chinese students. The researchers found that the Taiwanese students also used physical clues such as facial attractiveness to label people. The researchers found that PAS exists as far as high or low social desirability is concerned, but not for socially desirable traits of an intermediate degree. Moreover, the researchers found that young people who tend to adopt Chinese society values are more inclined to be influenced by physical attractiveness.

Youngmee & Wheeler (1997) offer an explanation for the apparent contradiction between the studies on the beauty effect in collectivist societies. They stated that while all cultures are subject to PAS influence, the content of the stereotype changes from culture to culture.

Shaffer, Crepaz, & Ru (2000) examined the presence of physical attractiveness stereotypes (PAS) in an individualist society (United States) compared to a collectivist society (Taiwan). The researchers found that the students in the collectivist society showed a higher rate of PAS than their peers in the individualist society. The researchers concluded that a process of “westernization” weakened the values of the collectivist society and blurred the differences between collective and individualist societies.

These studies are consistent with recent research that presents PAS as an international phenomenon. According to these studies, both Western and Eastern

societies tend to evaluate people's characters based on their external appearance. A study conducted by Babcock & Chiu (2002) on the impact of PAS in the Far Eastern labor market found that the HR managers in Hong Kong are influenced by the level of candidates' attractiveness for short-term entry-level positions. Candidates' appearances were more important than relevant job experience or aptitudes.

To the best of our knowledge, no cross cultural study has been conducted on the role of PAS in teaching evaluations of college professors. In the present study, we attempt to measure the influence of PAS in the academic world from a cross cultural perspective. In all cultural contexts, beauty or physical attractiveness is irrelevant to an instructor's performance, and standards for judging and evaluating faculty are purported to be objective and based solely on instructors' pedagogical and research abilities. Instructors are expected to impart theoretical knowledge to their students, and teach them relevant skills and tools; Students are expected to acquire this knowledge and these tools from their instructors. Students are expected to rate their instructors' teaching on feedback questionnaires regardless of instructors' physical attractiveness. The present study aimed to address the question of whether the beauty premium operates among people of diverse ethnic origins in the academic world.

## Method

To answer the research question, we compared the beauty premium effect in three ethnic groups in Israel: native Israelis, immigrants from FSU, and immigrants from Ethiopia. To avoid possible biases that stem from personal acquaintance with the professor, we showed pictures of attractive professors to participants who were not personally acquainted with the professors. There were two phases to the study: The

first phase of the study was designed to identify professors considered most attractive by each ethnic group. We asked 13 female and 12 male professors under the age of 40 to agree to allow us to photograph them for the purpose of the study. We asked three male and three female members of each ethnic group to rate the physical attractiveness of these 25 photos, on a 10-point Likert scale. To simulate reality, these raters' age was in the same age range of typical students, i.e. 20-30. The ratings of each photo were averaged and standardized separately by ethnic group of raters and by professor's gender. We considered the professor who received the highest standardized score as the most attractive professor of each sector.

Native Israelis and FSU immigrants rated the same female professor as the most attractive, whereas a second female professor was rated the most beautiful by Ethiopian immigrants. These photographs served as instruments in the second phase of this study. In the second phase, we showed participants photographs of the most highly rated female and male professors, based on ratings in the first phase. Each ethnic group of participants was shown the highest rated professors rated by their own ethnic group. We asked 30 participants (15 male and 15 female) in each sector to view the photographs and rate the professors on four dimensions on a 5-point Likert scale. Similarly to the first phase, to simulate reality, participants were the same age range as typical students, i.e. 20-30. In both phases we did not contact the respondents by a random sampling; rather, we used quota sampling of University students for each of the ethnic groups. Although random sampling would have been considered as the best way to select our respondents, we believe that this sampling method is more susceptible to self selection biases of raters; this is the rationale that has led us to prefer quota sampling.

The dimensions that were measured in the questionnaire:

- The degree to which this professor encourages students to think
- The degree to which this professor clearly explains the course material
- The degree to which this professor treats the students nicely
- The overall evaluation of the professor

As mentioned in the introduction section, Bokek-Cohen and Davidovich (2008a) claim that female professors are not awarded a beauty premium because of a contradiction between their role image and gender image. This contradiction is assumed to be prevalent among individuals who have more traditional or chauvinist attitudes toward women. For this reason, we sought to control for this contradiction by measuring the level of chauvinism of each respondent and then using it as a covariate in the calculation of the beauty-teaching rating correlation. Accordingly, in addition to the beauty and teaching ratings, respondents were also asked to complete the Attitudes toward Women Scale (AWS). The AWS Scale was originally developed in 1972 by Dr. Janet T. Spence and Dr. Robert Helmreich at the University of Texas. It was designed to tap into beliefs about the rights and roles of women, in comparison to men. It includes statements that describe roles and behaviors in all major areas of activity in which normative expectations could be, in principle, the same for men and women. The original instrument consists of 55 items, each of which has four response options, ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” We used a shorter version of the scale, which includes fifteen items, that was developed in 1978, and is the most widely-used version (for further information see <http://www.popcouncil.org/horizons/AIDSquest/summaries/ssaws.html>). The Cronbach's alpha of the 15-item version is

reported to be .89. The Cronbach's alpha of this version in our sample was 0.91.

## Results

To answer the research question it is necessary to calculate the correlation between beauty and teaching ratings in each ethnic sector separately. Table 1 exhibits partial Pearson correlations between the ratings of the female professors in each sector, after controlling for chauvinism. Table 2 displays partial Pearson correlations between the ratings of the male professors in each sector, after controlling for chauvinism.

Findings show that in all of the three ethnic groups, both male and female professors received a beauty premium by raters who do not know them. Partial Pearson correlations, after controlling for the chauvinism variable, were all positive and significant.

## Discussion

Our contribution to the extant literature on beauty premium in the academia is twofold: the first deals with enhancing the generalizability of previous findings to include additional cultural groups; the second is to re-evaluate the hitherto 'hidden' beauty premium for female professors, an effect which has been previously underestimated. We begin our discussion with the first contribution of our study.

Most studies on the beauty premium of college professors have been conducted in Western countries, especially in the United States and Germany. The purpose of our study was to examine whether a beauty premium for college professors prevails in additional cultural settings and contexts. In the current study, we demonstrated that this bias prevails not only in an American context but additionally in three different ethnic groups, namely the Israeli, FSU

**Table 1**

*Partial Pearson correlations between beauty and teaching ratings, chauvinism as a covariate, female professors*

	<b>Ethiopian Immigrants</b>	<b>FSU Immigrants</b>	<b>Native Israelis</b>
Partial Pearson correlation	0.614	0.680	0.565
Significance	0.000	0.000	0.001
N	30	30	30

**Table 2**

*Partial Pearson correlations between beauty and teaching ratings, chauvinism as a covariate, male professors*

	<b>Ethiopian Immigrants</b>	<b>FSU Immigrants</b>	<b>Native Israelis</b>
Partial Pearson correlation	0.514	0.375	0.682
Significance	0.004	0.045	0.001
N	30	30	30

immigrants, and Ethiopian immigrants sectors in Israel. By adopting a cross-cultural perspective and integrating our findings with those obtained from a recent stream of inductive studies, our knowledge of teaching evaluation biases that stem from physical appearance has been advanced.

Previous studies have shown a positive co-variance between professors' physical appearance and the magnitude of their teaching evaluations. Most of these studies calculated correlations without distinguishing between female and male professors. However, the studies that did make this distinction and reported correlations for women and men separately revealed a weaker beauty premium for female professors (Hamermesh & Parker, 2005; Susmuth 2006) or even no premium for them at all (Bokek-Cohen & Davidovich, 2008a). In their effort to explain these gender differences, Bokek-Cohen and Davidovich (2008b) conducted a comparative study and concluded that performance evaluations are impacted by a

beauty premium when employee gender image corresponds to employee role image. We assumed that raters who hold more chauvinistic attitudes towards women discriminate against female professors by refraining from awarding them higher ratings, while the image contradiction has less effect on more egalitarian raters. To examine this contradiction, we measured raters' chauvinism and egalitarian attitudes and used these ratings as covariates in the beauty-teaching correlation. Findings of the present study show that when controlling for this variable, all three ethnic groups studied awarded a beauty premium to female professors. Adding raters' attitude towards women to the analysis revealed the previously hidden beauty premium for female professors. In doing so, this research has filled a gap in our understanding of the gender effect in the beauty premium for college professors.

We will turn now to another methodological aspect of the study. Although the sample size (3X30=90) of our

study is relatively small, we nevertheless believe that this sample size is adequate for the exploratory nature of this study, which is a pioneer project in the innovative and unstudied topic of potential biases of teaching assessment in a cross-cultural context.

Furthermore, in spite of the relative small N we got medium and above medium Pearson correlation values (the lowest:  $r=0.375$ , the highest:  $r=0.682$ ), relatively small standard deviations in each sector, and most of these correlations appeared to be highly significant ( $p=0.000$ ;  $p=0.001$ ;  $p=0.004$ ;  $p=0.045$ ).

Several strong methodological points of the study also warrant attention. Most of the studies described in the introduction used teaching ratings obtained from the rated professors' "actual students." To exclude the possibility that the effect is bidirectional, i.e. beauty affects teaching ratings, and familiarity with the professor's personality and teaching method also affects the professor's beauty evaluations, we investigated the relationship between beauty evaluations and teaching evaluations by asking participants to rate unfamiliar professors solely based on their photographs; Some participants were students but none studied at the college where the professors teach. The correlations we found were not affected, either positively or negatively, by students' familiarity with the professors.

Our methodology also prevented a self-selection bias of professors, according to which professors who consented to have students' rate their physical attractiveness may be better teachers than those who did not grant their consent. Yet, a different self-selection bias of raters may have been at

work: It is possible that individuals who did not wish to participate as raters in the study were more sensitive to the issue of physical appearance. Thus, it can be speculated that the correlation coefficients would have been greater had they participated. The size of the present sample, while useful for initial investigation, may need to be increased for further analysis.

Our conclusions are based mainly on findings that were obtained from Christian or Jewish subjects. A more comprehensive examination could include additional cultures and religions, such as Moslem or Buddhist participants. Therefore we would welcome collaboration with colleagues who are interested in examining this phenomenon in their own countries. An important question remains unanswered: Does beauty affect young and old students similarly? We suggest comparing younger and older students, to see whether rater age constitutes a covariate for the beauty-teaching evaluation correlation. Yet another relevant question for future research is whether the magnitude of the beauty premium for attractive professors is dependent on the congruence between three factors: (a) their gender; (b) the gender image of the course they teach; (c) the level of the masculinity of the culture in their country. In other words, do male professors merit a beauty premium in feminine-stereotyped courses, for example, courses in the area of social sciences, in 'masculine' societies? Likewise, do female professors merit a beauty premium in masculine-stereotyped courses, such as courses in the area of engineering or physics, in "masculine" societies?

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