



# Physical Attractiveness in the Workplace: Customers Do Judge Books by Their Covers

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**Abstract.** – The physical attractiveness of others influences our professional and personal attitudes and behaviors in both strong and far-reaching ways. While governmental regulations help guard against businesses exploiting physical attractiveness during recruitment and selection, attractiveness bias can be ethically used in efforts related to marketing and customer service orientation. Accordingly, we review and summarize classic and contemporary research on the psychology of attractiveness and propose ideas and guidelines to help the service-hospitality industry seize opportunities to use “beauty in business.”

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Seasoned marketers across all industries know that “sex sells.” The general public recognizes this principle too, although both groups may not fully appreciate the wide-reaching effects the physical attractiveness of those around us has on our everyday attitudes and behaviors. Within the hospitality, service and leisure industries these effects apply not only to impersonal advertisements and promotional materials, but also to interpersonal interactions among coworkers and between company representatives and customers. With this in mind, we review and summarize classic and contemporary literature on the psychology of physical attractiveness. This foundation leads to a discussion of how companies can properly maintain the delicate balance between effective marketing versus adherence to ethical principles when it comes to taking advantage of the psychology of physical attractiveness. Keep in mind that we use the term *physical attractiveness* here to refer to the perceived beauty of a person’s anatomical features. Non-anatomical physical features obviously play a role in physical attractiveness, but they are not the main focus of this paper. Where the latter are discussed, it will be in the context of showing how they influence perceptions of the former.

## The “Beauty Premium”: A Very Real and Powerful Phenomenon

Studies consistently demonstrate that physical appearance does matter and that people intuitively equate *beauty* with concepts like *good-better*, *smart-successful* and *important-valuable*. Consider these fourteen beautiful facts:

1. On measures of affect and mood, physically attractive people score higher than less physically attractive people<sup>70</sup>.
2. People perceive physically attractive people as smarter, more successful, more sociable, more dominant, sexually warmer, mentally healthier and higher in self-esteem than their physically unattractive counterparts<sup>13,22,26,43</sup>. While this “beauty is good” effect is moderately strong<sup>22</sup>, studies show that attractive people are neither more nor less intelligent than less attractive people<sup>26,43,63</sup>.
3. Physically attractive people are more relaxed and socially adept and less socially anxious and lonely than less physically attractive people<sup>26,32</sup>.
4. We prefer to interact with people who are physically attractive<sup>28</sup>. For instance, physically attractive people are generally liked more than less physically attractive people<sup>13</sup> and they have greater social popularity<sup>26</sup>.
5. We are more likely to divulge personal information about ourselves to physically attractive people than we are to divulge less physically attractive people<sup>6</sup>.
6. We are more likely to help a physically attractive person than we are a physically unattractive person<sup>13</sup>.
7. If we are presented with a group of people and asked to use non-physical cues to identify who has psychopathology, we are more likely identify physically unattractive people as we are to identify more physically attractive people<sup>28,44</sup>.
8. Physically attractive people with psychological disturbance are judged to be more maladjusted and to have a poorer prognosis than less physically attractive people with the same psychological disturbance<sup>12</sup>.
9. A physically attractive person charged with the same crime as a less attractive person is more likely to be found not guilty of that crime<sup>23</sup>.
10. In court cases in which the crime is sex-related, physically unattractive defendants are considered to be more dangerous than better-looking offenders<sup>25,62</sup>. This effect is often independent of the actual grooming or attire of the defendant.

11. Physically attractive individuals found guilty of a particular crime are more likely to receive more lenient sentences than less attractive defendants<sup>18</sup>.
12. We are more drawn towards physically attractive strangers than to unattractive strangers of *either* sex<sup>10</sup>. For example, on a passenger train service in the UK, people avoided sitting next to people with physical deformities<sup>42</sup>.
13. Good-looking faces trigger the same kinds of brain networks that are activated when people become addicted to cocaine and gambling<sup>1</sup>.
14. There appears to be a universal, cross-cultural undesirability for people with facial disfigurements and other flaws<sup>27</sup>. Even babies seem to prefer physically attractive faces to physically unattractive ones<sup>54</sup>.

## **The Beauty Premium in HR and Business**

The natural tendency to ascribe all sorts of positive traits to beautiful people also means that we give them more breaks in life. This is nowhere more pronounced than in human resources. Physically attractive job candidates whose qualifications are similar to those of less attractive candidates are more likely to be hired for the same job<sup>30,55,56</sup>. This effect is particularly pronounced when the job application is of average quality. If the application is exceptional, physical attractiveness plays less of a role in the selection process<sup>71</sup>. The preference for physical attractiveness is often independent of actual grooming; the hiring bias occurs even against physically unattractive candidates who are well groomed.

Physical attractiveness bias does not end in the interview room. Compared with their less attractive counterparts, physically attractive workers earn more money<sup>19,70</sup>. In fact, one study<sup>35</sup> found that employees above-average in looks earn 5% more than average-looking employees, whereas employees below-average in looks earn about 7-9% less than average-looking employees<sup>4</sup>. In other research<sup>36</sup>, it was discovered that men of above average height earn about 6% more than men of average height, whereas men below-average in height experience a penalty of about -4%. There was also a significant penalty of about -5% for obese women (but not men).

Not only does the beauty premium benefit attractive employees, it also can benefit employers. Researchers<sup>58</sup> looked at advertising agencies and found that firms whose executives are good-looking have higher revenues and faster growth than similar firms whose executives are not attractive. When it comes to persuasion, beautiful people also have a definite advantage. They are more likely to be successful in changing other people's attitudes and in getting what they want<sup>14</sup>. Good-looking people even get money when they ask for it! When solicited for charitable donations, the more attractive the solicitor, the more money they get<sup>51</sup>. To be sure, physically attractive people are more likely to be successful in changing other people's attitudes and in getting what they want generally as well<sup>14</sup>.

### **The Darker Side of Beauty**

The sections above underscore the prevalence of a physical attractiveness bias. However, reactions to beauty can be so psychologically potent that they lead to interpersonal tension and conflict. For example, individuals who are *unusually* physically attractive are often at a *disadvantage*, because people attribute greater negative and egocentric traits to them<sup>28</sup>. Moreover, extremely attractive individuals experience unwanted sexual advances<sup>37</sup> and members of their own sex typically resent them. In fact, attractive people often are unsure of whether others like them for their appearance or for their inner qualities. They are also more likely to rely on their looks than on their other attributes. Furthermore, there is a *negative* correlation between physical attractiveness and honesty and concern for others<sup>22,26,43</sup>.

### **The Anatomy of Physical Attractiveness**

The double standard on physical attractiveness reveals that we do not assess people and situations in fair and objective ways. What complicates matters is that we often have specific criteria for what qualifies as "physically attractive, yet we are frequently willing to dismiss or modify those criteria in specific situations.

The following sections explore the nature of physical attractiveness by providing three additional lists. The features in the first list — Physical Features — are the foundation of “attractiveness” in general, and physical attractiveness specifically. Few of us would consider the qualities in this list to be unattractive. Most of us are drawn to these physical features, if only because they are the first thing we perceive when we first encounter someone, and we argue here that they account for the largest proportion of our physical attraction to people.

However, the factors in the second and third lists — Situational and Intra-individual Factors — often cause us to evaluate the features in the first list in a new ways. In fact, these factors make it impossible to conclude that two people with the exact same physical features are even moderately similar in terms of their over all physical attractiveness.

### *Universally preferred physical features*

*What is physically attractive?* Beauty would seem to be wholly subjective, but there is an effective heuristic for answering the question of what is physically attractive— attractiveness is associated with physical and psychological traits that are perceived to be indicators of good physical (and reproductive) health. Clearly there is variation in what specific individuals find personally attractive due to genetic, cultural, historical, psychodynamic and behavioral influences, but experts<sup>15</sup> have noted that people across cultures tend to agree that the following physical qualities make a person physically attractive:

- In both sexes clear skin and vibrant hair is admired as a sign of youth, vigor and good nutrition.
- In both sexes having a symmetrical face and body are indicative of good physical and psychological health and the absence of genetic abnormalities<sup>29,33,61,67</sup>.
- Qualities desirable in men include substantial height<sup>9,24</sup>, square jaw, wide brow, wide shoulders, strong arms, defined chest and a waist-to-hip ratio of about 1.0. Many of these features indicate that a man is healthy and is a good protector.

- Qualities desirable in women include full, red lips, large breasts, waist-to-hip ratio of about 0.7 and voluptuous buttocks. Many of these features indicate that a woman is able to bear healthy children<sup>8,65,66</sup> — a feature with personal and social benefits.
- In both sexes (although much more for men than women) features that are typically associated with a baby’s face are deemed attractive. In other words, there is an apparent preference for “cuteness”, which includes large, closely spaced eyes, a small, slightly upturned (or “button”) nose and a soft, rounded chin. Such baby-like features signal nurturance and non-dominance—traits that men appear to find very attractive. Women find these traits attractive too, often because nurturance is a positive quality in a mate<sup>15,45</sup>; however, women have a more significant preference for facial features which signal maturity, strength and dominance<sup>60</sup>.
- In both sexes an “average” face and body<sup>3,53</sup> are perceived as optimal. Few people like a nose, for instance, that is too large or too small. Average faces and bodies are composites that wash out extreme ends on the continuum of various features (i.e., they indicate the absence of potentially maladaptive genes).
- In both sexes unattractive facial features are often offset by attractive physiques.
- In both sexes certain physical, but non-anatomical features are especially desirable. In fact, these features can either counteract anatomical flaws or—at least for some people—can by themselves be more physically attractive than the kinds of anatomical features mentioned above. Examples include:
  - A person’s physical *style*, such as posture, stature, gait, eye contact and smile. Some people have a smile that is warm or bright enough to accentuate average physical features or even offset particularly *unattractive* physical features.
  - A person’s *body image*, including level of comfort with his/her own bodies. Nothing can be more physically unattractive than a person who dislikes their appearances (whether or not they are considered generally physically attractive). In fact, a physically unattractive person’s comfort with his/her own looks can sometimes make up for any physical flaws and actually become *more* physically attractive than a person who is already above-average looks (and *especially* a person above-average in looks who does *not* think that s/he is physically attractive).
  - The person’s level of *physicality with others*: some people are quite physically attracted to those who are more “touchy-feely” (e.g., people who like to give pats on the back, brushes on the arm, hugs or massages).
  - A person’s personal hygiene, grooming and dress. In some cases, exceptional *presentation* can make average or not-so-attractive faces and bodies look quite physically attractive.

- In both sexes a person who is similar to us in physical attractiveness. The reasons for this may include the following:
  - We are comfortable (and feel safer) with people who are similar to us.
  - We know ourselves well; if we consider ourselves to be physically healthy, then we will consider people of similar physical attractiveness to be healthy as well.
  - We do not like to be around people who are more attractive than us because we fear they will steal the limelight from us.

### *Situational factors*

The following *situational* factors are also influential in determining what a person considers physically attractive. As you will see, these factors make it clear that physical attractiveness is a very fluid construct, making it impossible to conclude that two individuals with identical physical features are even moderately similar to each other in perceived physical attractiveness. Indeed, our preferences for looks often depend on more than just what is right in front of our eyes.

- We find people who are *familiar* to us to be more physically attractive than those who are not familiar to us<sup>75</sup>. Familiar people seem “safe” and we cannot help but develop some degree of physical attraction towards such people. From an evolutionary sense, it is highly adaptive to form relationships with people with whom we feel safe, as opposed to people with whom we feel anxious, apprehensive or in danger.
- People who are in *close proximity* to us are more physically attractive to us than those who are not in close proximity. Research shows that merely being in the same general vicinity as another person can increase our over all liking for that person. The longer that two people are in close proximity, the greater the chance that they will end up liking each other. This classic principle is called the “mere exposure” effect<sup>74,75</sup>. In some cases, the mere exposure effect may extend to physical attractiveness. The longer we are exposed to someone, the more likely we will come to find him or her *physically* attractive. This is especially true if we really like the individual’s personality traits or if we like the person as a friend.
- Related to the above, people who are in our immediate focus of attention tend to be perceived as more physically attractive than those not in our immediate focus.
- People who are *similar* to us in terms of our personal characteristics and attitudes are often seen as more physically attractive as people who are dissimilar to us<sup>2,49</sup>.



It is important to note that the principle of similarity (“birds of a feather flock together”) in romantic relationships is an oversimplification. The degree of similarity observed actually depends on the particular individual-difference domain studied, with romantic partners showing strong similarity in age, political and religious attitudes; moderate similarity in education, general intelligence and values; and little or no similarity in personality characteristics<sup>50,72</sup>. Moreover, dissimilarity of partner’s characteristics (“opposites attract”) can also play an important role in romantic relationships. In fact, recent research suggests that it takes both components for a couple to experience the highest levels of relationship quality<sup>40,41,52</sup>.

- Our friends may come to be more physically attractive to us over time<sup>34</sup>. From an evolutionary perspective, this could be adaptive in that friends are strong and reliable, and, therefore, more likely than other people to be good providers for our children. The other part of the explanation here is cognitive; we interpret the fact that we spend so much time with a particular friend as a sign that we are actually physically attracted to them.
- People with positive personal qualities are seen as more physically attractive than people with less positive personal qualities<sup>34</sup>. In fact, we may overlook physical imperfections (and, indeed, such imperfections may become less noticeable over time) in people whose personal qualities we like. In a fascinating article in the December 2005 issue of *BBC History Magazine*, Tracy Borman discussed perceptions of beauty over the ages. He suggested that “[t]he overriding characteristic of female beauty is...charisma. This goes a long way towards explaining the appeal of women such as Mary, Queen of Scots, whose attraction is hard to understand from her portraits alone.” It would stand to reason that if we are exceptionally attracted to someone because of their personal, non-physical traits, then not only will we overlook their physical flaws (or even find their physical features meaningless), but we *may* even find them to be more physically attractive over time. In fact, exceptional personal qualities can make physical features unimportant.
- People with whom we have experienced something emotional or physically arousing are often perceived as more attractive than they were before such an experience<sup>21</sup>. For instance, if you have just had a really deep “heart-to-heart” with someone, that person may seem more physically attractive to you than s/he was before the conversation. On a more dramatic level, imagine enduring a traumatic situation with someone. As the hours go by, you start to find the other person increasingly physically attractive. This is due not only to the familiarity that results from being next to that person, but also the emotional energy that is created by the situation. More importantly, you come to interpret the physical arousal caused by the situation as a sign that you are actually physically (sexually) attracted to that person (i.e., “My heart was racing when I was in the room with her. I guess that means I actually find her attractive.”). This effect parallels the “bar closing phenomenon”, i.e., having been unable to find a sexual partner who

is attractive to us, we suddenly become physically attracted to whichever people are left in the bar at the end of the evening — even if earlier in the evening we did not find them to be particularly attractive at all<sup>31</sup>.

- The *contrast effect* is also important. If we have recently seen a physically unattractive person, everyone we see afterwards seems more attractive (more so than they would have seemed had we seen the less attractive person beforehand). Similarly, if we have recently been exposed to a particularly attractive person (either in person or media), we will find that the people we used to consider physically attractive are no longer as attractive<sup>46,48,73</sup>. Note, however, that the contrast effect is *temporary*. Interestingly, contrast effects also apply to self-evaluations of our *own* physical attractiveness<sup>5,68</sup>.

In many cases, it is clear that we find someone attractive over time; we “grow” into finding them attractive. However, it must be said that situational factors—especially the passage of time—can go only so far. Situational factors such as proximity, as well as personal factors like idiosyncratic variation in preferences (discussed below) can create only so much “wobble room” in terms of viewing a person as more physically attractive than we originally perceived them to be.

### *Cultural and social influences*

Our personal bias based on our reading and understanding of the literature is that cultural and social factors do not influence preferences for physical attractiveness as much as we would like to think. First, there are certain features which people in all cultures find physically attractive<sup>16</sup>. Second, what may *look* like a unique cultural/social taste for certain types of bodies and faces may be, at bottom, a universal preference that expresses in terms of particular geographic conditions. For instance, men appear to have a universal preference for women whose bodies signal reproductive health.

One of the cues of reproductive health is relative body fat. In geographic regions where food is scarce, there is a preference for larger women because the accumulation of body fat means that a woman is of such good health that she will be able to sustain a pregnancy even under conditions of deprivation<sup>65</sup>. In our Western culture, where food is abundant, the preference is for thinner women. Indeed, not only is too much body fat harmful for a mother (because it will not be necessary for the pregnancy), it is often perceived as a sign

that someone has genetic abnormalities, biochemical disorders or certain emotional issues which may lead to over-eating. In the evolutionary psychology literature, this differential, seemingly “cultural” preference for body weight is actually an example of what is called “*evoked culture*”, i.e., the environment, rather than the society itself, “evokes” particular physical preferences<sup>69</sup>.

### *Contextual cues of physical un-attractiveness*

The following factors can make a person appear significantly *less* physically attractive, even if the person would generally be considered physically attractive for any of the reasons mentioned in the lists above:

- *Excessive concern over physical appearance*, e.g., a really handsome man who constantly wonders what others think of how he looks; a woman who complains that nobody will like her because she—realistically—assesses that she is homely.
- *Lack of confidence over one’s physical appearance*. Even if a person actually *is* homely, confidence in one’s appearance—a sign that someone is mature enough to have made peace with the body that they were given in this life—can make a person seem *less* homely or even *more* physically attractive.
- *Self-deprecation of one’s physical appearance*. This draws attention away from whatever non-physical qualities could have more than made up for one’s homeliness (and even made a person more physically attractive than they would normally seem). So unappealing is this behavior that it can make even a physically attractive person look ugly.
- *Certain personal qualities*. Sometimes people find us *physically* unattractive because they do not like our personal qualities—qualities that may or may not be “bad” and which, therefore, we should not necessarily aim to change. For instance, if a really attractive person happens to be very insightful and you fear that s/he is able to divine your secrets and insecurities (and you erroneously think that these secrets will be let out to the world), then you will find that this person’s physical attractiveness diminishes over time. Conversely, if a physically attractive person has personal traits that truly *are* abhorrent (mean, rude, insensitive, belligerent), then they, too, will come to be seen as *less* physically attractive over time.
- *Self-deprecation of one’s mental health or personal qualities*, e.g., “I am so weird” or “I have a lot of issues.”

- *Expressions of social insecurity.* Asking a person the following: “Why don’t you like me?” or “Why do you like the other coworkers better than me?”

### *The Bottom Line on Beauty*

While there is no clear and convincing evidence indicating the specific impact that each list of features discussed in this review has in determining people’s perception of attractiveness, our interpretation of the available literature is as follows:

- Universal physical features account for about **60%** of our physical attraction to other people.
- Situational factors (including cultural standards for what is “attractive”) account for about **25%** of our physical attraction to other people.
- Intra-individual preferences (based on genes, personal history, psychodynamics and personality traits) account for about **10%** of our physical attraction to other people.
- Cultural and social preferences account for a marginal degree of our physical attraction to people, perhaps **5%**

Despite that perhaps as much as 60% of what is generally considered attractive is based on specific, universally-preferred physical features, it is still important to keep in mind that people find each other attractive for many different reasons. Indeed, not only is there a double standard in terms of how we treat physically attractive people, but there is also a differential interpretation of specific physical features based upon several non-physical criteria.

### **Exploiting physical attractiveness in an ethical fashion**

Many governmental agencies have established policies and procedures that ensure people are hired based on their abilities and overall “job fit,” as opposed to superficial characteristics that are deemed irrelevant to job performance. Interested readers can consult resources like the *Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures* (see: <http://www.uniformguidelines.com/>) to learn more about such policies, but obviously an

applicant's physical attractiveness is one characteristic that would be deemed irrelevant to Human Resources and thus is a discriminatory practice. We note that this may not be the case for industries like the entertainment and fashion/modeling industries, where degree of physical attractiveness is inherently valued and promoted as a commodity.

Nevertheless, the use of physical attractiveness as the basis of hiring decisions is not the same as using physical attractiveness in responsible and creative ways in business situations. For example, we present below some ways that organizations can effectively and ethically exploit "beauty in business:"

- Line staff and other employees with substantial contact with customers will be better liked and more persuasive as their *perceived* physical attractiveness increases. Thus, establish high standards with employees related to personal hygiene, dress and knowledge of trends in fashion and manner that are considered attractive and desirable. Companies may even consider loaning special accessories to employees for use during work hours — accessories that are associated with high social status and success such as fine watches, jewelry or even some types of cosmetics, colognes and perfumes. These products may even be merchandise sold on the premises, thereby offering an up-sell opportunity for retail businesses.
- Well-qualified and experienced spokespeople will be better liked and more persuasive if they are physically attractive, so choose someone with a personal and professional image (appearance and charisma) that complements your brand equity. Training or coaching in public speaking is often an excellent investment for managers.
- Promotional material will be more effective if it includes a photograph of a physically attractive spokesperson or figurehead, such as the CEO. Use a clear and close-up head shot, and avoid using props that can distract attention from the view of the pictured person's face. Moreover, professional headshots should be updated regularly – at least once a year.
- Brand equity will increase in the public's mind if the brand is associated with images of physical attractiveness, such as an endorsement by a popular celebrity. Endorsements can be promotional quotes or photographs of a celebrity interacting with your CEO, spokesperson or other employees. Photographs can then be placed prominently in a waiting area of your company or used in promotional material. The psychology of celebrity worship has advanced in recent years and clearly shows that the perceived authority of celebrities carries significantly more clout with fans and admirers<sup>57</sup>.

- Establish and maintain high standards for verbal and nonverbal behaviors in employees, especially those whom interact most with customers. A person with strong *self-efficacy* (high levels of self-esteem, personal competence and “Emotional IQ”) is deemed highly attractive by both sexes.
- Display art or prominently show photographs or video presentations of beautiful people throughout your organization and even your website — especially “pretty faces.” Often just looking at pretty faces (in person or via a media forum) improves people’s moods<sup>47</sup>.
- Where appropriate, promote the use of respectful, light touches (such as on the arm), warm handshakes and sincere compliments by employees in their interactions with customers.
- Promote “small talk” by employees as they are serving their customers — small talk can reveal similarities between customers and employees (e.g., “I too have a sister named Rebecca” or “My favorite color is also green.”). *Similarity* and *familiarity* enhances perceptions of attractiveness.
- Related to the above, have employees strive to remember customers’ names and then greet those customers by name whenever possible.

## **Final comments**

From an ethical and marketing perspective, the service-hospitality industry can either fight against the types of attractiveness biases presented here or it can learn from them and manage them beneficially. As professionals, we have a responsibility to maintain a thoughtful balance in the use of “beauty in business.”

Of course, our responsibility extends to educating our peers in the workplace. We certainly do not want to punish people for having a preference for “attractive” people; after all, that preference is rooted in nature and biology, and it is adaptive. What is not adaptive, however, is minimizing the value of individuals — employees and customers alike — because they are not as attractive as other people. We often miss out on good friendships and even highly valuable employees by placing a premium solely on appearance. The result is that we put ourselves in a position where we lack the kinds of friends that have our best interests in mind and the kinds of employees who can provide exceptional non-physical resources that benefit an entire organization. In other words,

people who are only average in physical appearance but exceptional in other ways are more valuable and effective resources in the long-term than individuals who are exceptionally good-looking but only mediocre in other ways.

With this in mind, and given the fourteen sobering facts about beauty in the introduction, we are compelled to end with another list. This time it is a set of guidelines to help ensure we consistently treat our coworkers and customers fairly and ethically:

1. Make an effort, every now and then, to actively consider how we might be misjudging people because of their looks and even realize that we may be assessing their actual physical features using a double standard.
2. Not afford people special status just because of their looks. Beautiful is *not* more “good,” and it certainly does not make a person “special.” Furthermore, because beauty is something we are born with and *not* something we have earned or achieved, it should not be considered when awarding people special “privileges” in relationships.
3. In the context of employment, use a structured system of checks and balances to ensure that applicants are being evaluated fairly. Employee skill assessments are especially useful in this respect<sup>39</sup>, and they can be a strong foundation to an overall process of candidate due diligence<sup>38</sup>.
4. Not think that we are superior to others because of our own level of physical attractiveness.

It is amazing to us how some of the most seemingly mundane and arbitrary things in life can have such a strong influence on things like our mood, job performance and goals.

The physical attractiveness of others is one such example. The broad service industry is in the business of catering to people’s egos and exceeding their service expectations — in short to make people *feel good*. Careful and responsible uses of attractiveness biases are simple plans of action, but they can substantially assist businesses in fulfilling that very worthwhile goal.

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