

**How Does an Instructor's Physical Attractiveness Impact a Student's Perceptions of the
Instructor's Teaching Abilities?**

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Abstract:

This report investigates the impact of an instructor's physical attractiveness on their students' evaluations of their teaching abilities. Student evaluations of teachers are of growing importance for educational facilities, to improve their curriculums and produce graduates that are well-equipped for the modern workplace. This study investigates the presence of a 'beauty premium' in academics, and whether students perceive physically attractive instructors as better teachers. This data analyzed in this report was collected from a questionnaire distributed to five social media platforms (Reddit, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and Discord) over a three-day period. The questionnaire is designed to control for the subjectivity of physical attractiveness. The respondents consisted of mainly undergraduate students aged 18-23 years old. The results of this study confirm the hypothesis that students believe that physically attractive instructors have enhanced teaching abilities. In particular, this study recognized two explanations for this result. Physically attractive instructors tend to have better social skills and communication skills, thus they encourage students to engage in lectures and participate in class discussions. Also, the results indicate a tendency for students to assume that physically attractive instructors are lenient graders. This study is limited by its lack of consideration for a gender and age bias and the results do not distinguish between instructors teaching online or in-person.

Introduction

There is a growing popularity for student evaluations of teachers (SETs) in post-secondary academic institutions. They guide faculty as they make adjustments to their curriculum and teaching materials. Ultimately, post-secondary institutions depend on SETs to keep pace with the growing demands of modern education. In light of the importance of these evaluations, it is critical to identify any intervening variables that may influence a student's evaluation of an instructor. Hence, this study investigates student attitudes towards physically attractive instructors.

Background

Economists Kanazawa and Still (2018) identified a 'beauty premium' in all industries. They found that physically attractive individuals secure more satisfying careers and receive higher wages than their less-attractive counterparts.

Firstly, the individual differences theory posits that the beauty premium is a manifestation of one's intrinsic qualities. Better looking individuals likely have better social experiences during development (Kanazawa and Still, 2018). Consequently, they have well-developed personalities. In regards to instructor personalities, Carpenter et al. (2020) observed that students are more engaged in lectures presented by extraverted instructors.

Secondly, a contrary theory suggests that the beauty premium is actually a 'beauty bias'. Babin et al. (2020) found that female instructors received substantially higher effectiveness ratings from their in-person classes than their online classes. A psychological justification for students' implicit bias is termed 'the halo effect'. It is defined as the tendency to exaggerate the virtues and the competency of physically attractive individuals. Similarly, a visual pedagogy

study by Martikainen (2019) indicates that students associate instructors that are physically attractive with being kind, gentle and caring. Overall, it is difficult to discern whether the beauty premium in academics arises from the students' bias or the instructor's intrinsically-enhanced teaching ability.

Purpose Statement and objectives

The purpose of this study is to test the belief that the physical attractiveness of instructors influences their students' evaluations by relating the physical attractiveness of instructors to their overall effectiveness in SETs, controlling for the student's opinion of attractiveness. The objectives of this research are two-fold. Firstly, this study aims to identify whether there is currently a 'beauty premium' among student evaluations of teachers in post-secondary institutions. Secondly, this study aims to identify the mechanism of this phenomenon. The results of this study intend to describe how an instructor's physical attractiveness influences a student's perception of the instructor's competency and personality. Finally, this study aims to describe how a student's perception of an instructor impacts the student's engagement in the instructor's class.

Hypothesis

This study hypothesizes that physical attractiveness positively affects student evaluations of instructors. In effect, more physically attractive instructors can expect to receive higher overall teaching evaluation scores.

Limitations

This study is limited by several key factors involving measures of teaching abilities and physical attractiveness. Firstly, this study is limited by what is considered physically attractive. There is a substantial body of literature that indicates that the definition of beauty is relatively standard within a small community (Kanazawa and Still, 2018). However, there are significant discrepancies in the beauty standards of different cultures and generations (Kanazawa and Still, 2018). Therefore, this study asks respondents to reflect on the instructor they find the most physically attractive, to control the subjectivity of physical attractiveness. Unfortunately, this inhibits comparison between the results of instructors of different levels of attractiveness.

Secondly, this study is limited by the discrepancy between student satisfaction in the online and in-person teaching environment. Instructors often have more difficulty engaging with students in an online environment than the face-to-face classroom. Hence, instructors that teach online courses may be disadvantaged in SETs. To address this, this study took advantage of the online to in-person transition in learning that took place at the University of Toronto during the time of this study's data collection. Some students experienced an instructor's teaching abilities in both the online and in-person environment. From this body of students, over half of them indicated that their instructor teaches similarly in both environments. Therefore, the online environment may not be a significant hindrance to an instructor's perceived teaching abilities.

Methodology

This study utilizes secondary research collected from online databases of peer-reviewed articles sourced by Google Scholar and the University of Toronto Libraries. This study collected primary research via a questionnaire posted on five social media platforms: Instagram, Twitter,

Reddit, Facebook, and Discord. On each platform, the questionnaire was posted under subgroupings of posts related to academia. The Twitter, Instagram and Reddit posts included the survey's hyperlink and the hashtags: 'academics', 'research', 'survey', and 'student'. The Discord post was distributed to several channels of discussion run by the University of Toronto. The questionnaire was also posted to the *WRR104: Writing Reports 2022* online platform. The questionnaire was posted for three days and 45 responses were collected. The questionnaire contains 19 questions and 1 qualifying question. A copy of the questionnaire is provided in the appendix.

Body

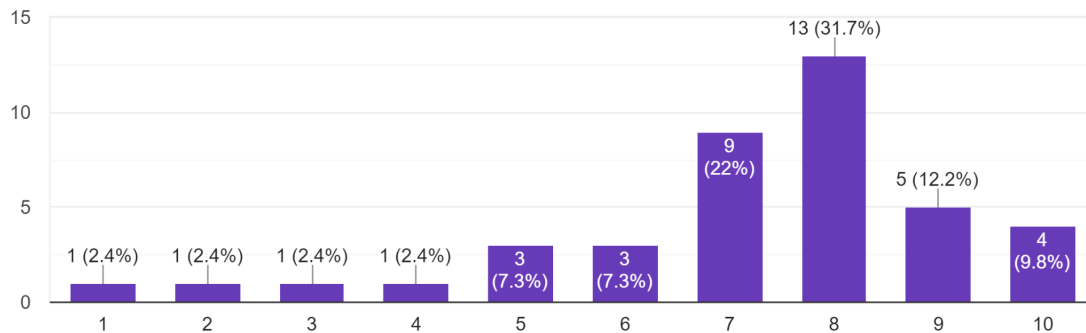
Results

The questionnaire collected quantitative results. The qualifying question narrowed the respondents to current post-secondary students, including part-time and full-time students. Although 45 responses were collected, 2 respondents did not consent to participate in the questionnaire, and 2 respondents are not currently attending at least two classes at a post-secondary institution. Therefore only 41 responses may be analyzed. Each question received between 39 to 41 responses.

The primary section of the questionnaire refers to the instructor that the respondent deems is the most physically attractive, in comparison with all of their current instructors. Overall, the genders of the most attractive instructors were either male (58.5%) or female (41.5%). Most instructors are estimated to be between 30-39 years of age (43.9%) and 20-29 years of age (36.6%). A small portion of instructors are between 40-49 years old (14.6%). Only one respondent was unable to estimate the age of their most physically attractive instructor.

The question asking for respondents to rate their most physically attractive instructor's appearance received a range of responses, as shown in *figure 1*.

Figure 1. A bar graph illustrating the range of responses to the question: *How would you rate this instructor's physical attractiveness on a scale from 1 (homely) to 10 (striking)?*



Respondents were similarly asked to rate the instructor's overall teaching abilities on a scale from 1 (poor) to 10 (excellent). This question received a less diverse range of responses. The mode of the responses are 8 and 9 (29.3% of respondents for each), while only 22% of respondents described their abilities as excellent. Only 1 respondent described their instructor's abilities as below average with a rating of 3 (2.4%). The rest of the respondents rated their instructor's abilities as average or slightly above average (4.9% for 5 and 6, and 7.3% for 7). An overwhelming majority of respondents (70.7%) anticipate that they will receive a final grade of 80% or above in this instructor's class.

Then, respondents selected from a provided range of personality traits to describe their most attractive instructor's personality, as shown in *table 1*. This question received 5 open responses describing the instructor as friendly, bubbly, reasonable, understanding, and warm.

Table 1. *The distribution of personality traits selected to describe the respondent's most physically attractive instructor*

Personality Trait	Frequency of response (%)
Extraverted	51.2
Creative	41.5
Confident	75.6
Agreeable	78
Conscientious	26.8
Neurotic	4.9

Next, the questionnaire asks respondents to what extent they agree or disagree with several statements referring to their engagement in this instructor's class and the instructor's communication skills, as shown in *table 2*.

Table 2. The number of responses received for each statement regarding the class taught by the respondent's most physically attractive instructor and the extent to which respondents agree or disagree

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I am more motivated to study for this class than most of my other classes	7	9	15	7	3
I feel comfortable asking questions in class	15	11	7	8	0
I often participate in class discussions	13	12	7	5	4
I am confident in my knowledge of the class content	12	9	9	10	1
The instructor communicates effectively	19	17	3	2	0
The instructor is more competent than my other instructors	11	10	17	2	1

The final section of the questionnaire includes several demographic questions. Overall, the respondents identify as female (65%), male (32.5%) and transgender (2.5%). Almost all respondents are completing an undergraduate degree and are between 18-23 years of age (97.6%). There is a wide range among the respondents' fields of study and grade point averages. The majority (53.7%) are studying life sciences. Similarly, there is a range among the sexuality of respondents, although 56.4% describe themselves as heterosexual and 33.3% describe themselves as bisexual.

Discussion

Overall, the results of the primary research support the hypothesis of this study. Firstly, most respondents rated their instructor's attractiveness as significantly above average. Therefore, the instructor described in the questionnaire accurately matches each respondent's subjective image of beauty. The results indicate that 80.6% of respondents believe this instructor has strong teaching abilities (8-10). This is synonymous with research by Rosen (2017) who found that 70% of 'hot' professors received perfect overall teaching scores. Therefore, this study confirms the presence of a 'beauty premium' among student evaluations of instructors.

Next, the results of this study suggest that the mechanism of the beauty premium phenomenon is due to their enhanced social skills. The instructors were most frequently described as extraverted, confident, and agreeable. Kanazawa and Still (2018) justify that these traits improve an individual's relationships with their colleagues. Thus, physically attractive instructors likely create strong relationships with their fellow instructors and their students. However, in contrast to what is predicted by the halo effect, this did not appear to improve the students' opinions of the instructors competency.

This study also suggests that student satisfaction is improved by having a more lenient grader. Since, only half of respondents feel confident in their knowledge of the class content yet over a third of respondents anticipate to receive a high final grade of 80% or higher. This suggests that students anticipate the instructor is a lenient grader. Moreover, Martikainen (2019) found that students predict that physically attractive instructors have a kind and generous personality. Student satisfaction is highly influenced by the instructor's grading strictness as students are more likely to succeed in classes with lenient grading schemes (Tran & Do, 2020).

This suggests that students prefer physically attractive instructors because they anticipate them to be generous graders.

Alternatively, Tan et al. (2019) deduce that a student's degree of confidence is the main determinant of an instructor's abilities. Furthermore, Hernández-Julián and Peters (2017) discovered that students gain confidence in classes with physically attractive peers and instructors (Hernández-Julián & Peters, 2017). This study contradicts these results as 75.6% of respondents describe their instructor as confident while only 51.2% of respondents reported feeling confident themselves. However, respondents feel extremely comfortable participating in class discussions and asking questions. Although, most respondents do not feel more or less motivated to study for a class taught by a physically attractive instructor. Ultimately, the findings indicate that physically attractive instructors are successful in engaging students in class, though they do not motivate students to work outside of class to gain confidence in their knowledge of the material.

This study combines the data obtained for male and female instructors. This presents an additional limitation to this study as this prevents comparisons of the 'beauty premium' between genders. Interestingly, this may be significant as some literature suggests only males receive the beauty premium, while others contradict this by suggesting only females receive a beauty premium (Babin et al. 2020; Murray et al. 2020). Furthermore, the age range of the instructors (20-39 years of age) suggests that younger instructors are preferred over older instructors. This may be due to the increased physical attractiveness associated with youth, as suggested by Murray et al. (2020). However, this study cannot indicate whether younger instructors are preferred because of their increased attractiveness or an intrinsic factor such as their relatability to young students (Murray et al., 2020).

Conclusion

This report investigates the impact of an instructor's physical attractiveness on their students' evaluations of their teaching abilities via a questionnaire. The results of this study confirm the hypothesis that physically attractive instructors are viewed as better teachers. Moreover, physically attractive instructors engage students' attention in class but do not motivate students to study outside of class. Additionally, this study presents a novel perspective on the beauty premium. The results indicate that students may prefer attractive instructors because they associate them with kindness and consequently anticipate them to be lenient graders. However, this study is limited by its lack of data on the difference between the beauty premium received by males, females, and instructors of different ages. Moreover, this study did not distinguish between instructors in online or in-person classes.

Student evaluations of teachers serve to guide the objectives of educational institutions as they make changes to their faculty and curriculums to improve student satisfaction. Therefore, student evaluations are critical for educational institutions to continue to improve their faculty and adjust their curriculums. Future research should investigate if male and female instructors receive different outcomes from the beauty premium. Additionally, future researchers may consider why young instructors are favored among students. This may identify the presence of a beauty bias, or may indicate whether students value a relatable instructor more than an experienced instructor. This may clarify why students award instructors a beauty premium and may predict the measure of its impact on the validity of SETs.

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Appendix

Blank copy of the Questionnaire:

Hot or Not: Impact of instructor attractiveness on student evaluations

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this 5 minute research questionnaire. Your feedback is greatly appreciated. The topic of this research is the impact of an instructor's physical attractiveness on a student's perceptions of their teaching abilities. It's important to understand what impacts a student's perceptions of their instructor's abilities as student evaluations of instructors are critical in improving teaching methods and, consequently, student learning.

Please read the following before you continue forward with the questionnaire. Your consent to the terms below is required:

1. That I understand that this questionnaire will be used to complete a final formal report for WRR104 H1S which shall be read by the professor and/or teaching assistant.
2. That I understand that the information shall not be published.
3. That I understand that the researcher values my anonymity, so I shall not be asked to provide any confidential, identifying information.
4. That I understand I can stop answering questions at any time.
5. That the information collected for this survey shall be carefully discarded once the report for WRR104 H1S has been completed

☐ Yes, I consent to participating in this survey.

☐ No, I do not wish to participate in this survey.

If you have any questions or concerns about this research or the use of the data from this questionnaire, please leave a comment in the text box below.

1. Are you currently attending at least two classes at a post-secondary institution?
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
 - ☐ Prefer not to respond

Questions 2-10 refer to the instructor that you find is the most physically attractive, in comparison to all of your instructors this semester:

2. What best describes the gender of the instructor?

- Female
 - Male
 - Another gender
 - Prefer not to respond
3. What is the approximate age of the instructor?
- 20-29 years
 - 30-39 years
 - 40-49 years
 - 50-59 years
 - 60+ years
 - Not sure
 - Prefer not to respond
4. Why did you choose to enroll in this instructor's course? Choose all that apply:
- It is compulsory for my program/field of study
 - It seemed like an interesting course
 - It seemed like an easy course that I could succeed in
 - It was highly recommended by a friend and/or online evaluation (e.g. ratemyprofessors.com)
 - It was the only course that had spots left and fit my schedule
 - I heard/read that the instructor was physically attractive
 - Prefer not to respond
5. How would you rate this instructor's physical attractiveness? (1 = homely, 10 = striking, the average person is rated 5)
- | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
 - Prefer not to respond
6. How would you rate this instructor's overall teaching abilities? (1 = poor, 10 = Excellent)
- | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
 - Prefer not to respond
7. How would you describe this instructor's personality? Choose all the traits that apply.
- The instructor is extraverted
 - The instructor is creative
 - The instructor is confident
 - The instructor is agreeable
 - The instructor is conscientious
 - The instructor is neurotic

- Prefer not to respond

8. The following statements refer to your current experience in this instructor's class. Please say how much you agree or disagree with the following statements.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Prefer not to respond
I am more motivated to study for this class than most of my other classes						
I feel comfortable asking questions in class						
I often participate in class discussions						
I am confident in my knowledge of the class content						
The instructor communicates effectively						
The instructor is more competent than my other instructors						

9. If applicable, did you find that this instructor teaches better online or face-to-face?

- This instructor teaches better online
- This instructor teaches better face-to-face
- This instructor teaches the same regardless of if it is online or face-to-face
- Not applicable
- Prefer not to respond

10. What do you anticipate your grade to be in this instructor's class?

- A (80-100%)
- B (70-79%)
- C (60-69%)
- D (50-59%)
- F (0-49%)
- Prefer not to respond

11. Please say how important the following characteristics are in determining the capabilities of an instructor.

	Extremely important	Important	Neither important or unimportant	Unimportant	Extremely unimportant	Prefer not to respond
The instructor is enthusiastic about teaching						
The instructor is well organized						
The instructor is approachable						

12. Please select the approximate age at which you think individuals of the given gender look their best?

Gender	18-29 years	30-39 years	40-49 years	50-59 years	60+ years	Prefer not to respond
Female						
Male						
Other						

13. Please say how much you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Prefer not to respond
I am more comfortable talking to physically attractive						

individuals than average-looking or unattractive individuals						
I would rather watch a presentation by a physically attractive individual than an average-looking or unattractive individual						

14. Which of the following most accurately describes you? Choose all that apply.

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Non-binary
- ☐ Transgender
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Prefer not to respond

15. What is your current level of post-secondary study?

- ☐ Certificate program
- ☐ Undergraduate
- ☐ Masters
- ☐ Doctorate
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Prefer not to respond

16. What is your approximate age?

- ☐ 18-20 years
- ☐ 21-23 years
- ☐ 24-26 years
- ☐ 27-29 years
- ☐ 30+ years
- ☐ Prefer not to respond

17. What is your field of study? Choose all that apply:

- ☐ Computer science
- ☐ Engineering
- ☐ Humanities
- ☐ Life sciences

- ☐ Law
- ☐ Math and physical sciences
- ☐ Medicine
- ☐ Social sciences
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Prefer not to respond

18. What best describes your sexual orientation? Choose all that apply.

- ☐ Asexual
- ☐ Bisexual
- ☐ Heterosexual
- ☐ Homosexual
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Prefer not to respond

19. What is your overall grade point average (GPA)? Please give your answer to one decimal place.

- ☐ Prefer not to respond

20. Please suggest how this research questionnaire may be improved.

- ☐ Prefer not to respond

Thank you for taking the time to respond to this questionnaire. Your participation is greatly appreciated. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this research or this questionnaire, please leave a comment in the box below.