

# 390 Midterm Paper

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## Introduction

Physical appearance plays a critical role in how people are perceived and treated by others. The body of empirical literature investigating physical appearance and its potential outcomes for individuals is vast – in particular, psychologists and other researchers have investigated the “beautiful is good” phenomenon: one’s physical appearance may lead others to assume certain qualities about them, and beauty is assumed to be correlated with positive traits (Dion, Berscheid, et. al., 1972). Therefore, conventionally attractive people may experience certain benefits from their appearance, and less attractive people may experience certain consequences. In popular terminology, this phenomenon has been coined as “pretty privilege”.

One area of influence beauty may play a role in is in labor market outcomes. While previous research on this topic has been inconsistent, the general idea is that people may presume that beauty implies success (or traits that make one “successful”), and in turn attractive people attract more success. Roszell, Kennedy, and Grabb (1989) investigated the relationship between physical attractiveness and economic success, specifically income attainment, among the Canadian working population.

## Methodology

The researchers used Canadian panel data containing information about respondents’ physical attractiveness, income (in 1979 and 1981), education, occupational status, socioe-

conomic status, gender, gender composition of the respondent's job, and age. The sample size for this study was 1,062 respondents and was generally representative of the Canadian population. Attractiveness was ranked by respondents' interviewers on a 5-point scale, ranging from homely (1) to strikingly handsome or beautiful (5).

The researchers first reported Pearson correlations for income (1981) and each of the predictors, as well as physical attractiveness and each of the predictors. They then performed a regression analysis of income on physical attractiveness, controlling for the other predictors. In order to test for interactions between physical attractiveness and some of the control variables, they then performed the same multiple regression on subsets of the sample.

## Results

The Pearson correlations indicated that attractiveness had a small positive relationship with higher income, education, and occupational status. As is expected, income had a larger positive relationship with all of the other predictors, and men tended to earn higher incomes. Attractiveness and socioeconomic status did not have a significant relationship.

A simple regression of income (1981) on physical attractiveness found that on average, for a single unit increase on the attractiveness scale, respondents' income increased by \$1,988. When controlling for the other predictors, the estimated effect of physical attractiveness on income decreased, but was still significant: regressing income (1981) on all 8 predictors (income (1971), education, occupational status, socioeconomic status, gender, gender composition of the respondent's job, and age), yielded that respondents' income increased by \$1,046 for every single unit increase in attractiveness, holding the predictors constant. Physical attractiveness, income (1979), gender job composition, and gender were the only statistically significant predictors at  $\alpha = 0.05$ .

The researchers then tested for interactions between physical attractiveness and some of the control variables by performing the same multiple regression above on subsets of the sample. The multiple regression with only female respondents found that physical

attractiveness was no longer a significant predictor of income (1981); however, the regression with only male respondents only found that physical attractiveness was still a significant predictor. When performed on subsets by gender job composition (by 0-25% male, 26-50% male, 51-75% male, and 76-100% male), the researchers found that physical attractiveness was a significant predictor of income only in male-dominated occupations. Lastly, when the regression was performed on subsets by age (18 to 30, 31 to 50, 51 and older), the researchers found that attractiveness was a significant predictor of income only for those middle-aged and older.

### **Normative Concern**

If the researchers' findings are accurate, they indicate that under certain conditions attractiveness is associated with higher incomes. Therefore, there is concern for potential arbitrary labor market discrimination when attractiveness, which is irrelevant to someone's skill level or ability to successfully perform their job, plays a role in the income that employees receive. In the hypothetical scenario that two employees exist with identical traits in every other regard (schooling, skill, position, etc.) at the same company, but the more attractive employee makes more money, a clear normative concern in labor market discrimination exists.

Arbitrary discrimination on the grounds of physical attractiveness may be subconscious and not done with harmful intent, albeit harmful in impact. However, there is also the possibility that the disparity in income by attractiveness is not through explicit employer-employee discrimination, but because people may see attractiveness as a proxy for other traits: perhaps conventionally attractive people are viewed as more outgoing or approachable and thus are able to form better relationships with their coworkers, making them ultimately more efficient workers. This scenario is a representation of the concepts of "beauty is good" or "pretty privilege", where explicit labor market discrimination may not exist, but an ethical concern is still present in that "beauty" is unfairly assumed to imply positive personality traits while "ugliness" is not.