



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Social Networks

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/socnet



Beauty and social capital: Being attractive shapes social networks

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online xxx

Keywords:

Beauty
Physical attractiveness
Social networks
Social capital
Structural holes
Experiment
Demographic

ABSTRACT

It is a fact of life that being beautiful is advantageous (Hamermesh, 2011). Whether we consider incomes or the marriage market, the more attractive one is, the better one does. Drawing on psychological research that explains why beauty pays, we hypothesize that more attractive people will exploit social network opportunities differently than less attractive people and, consequently, their networks will comprise more beneficial features. As predicted, results of an experiment showed that more attractive people were more likely to select for themselves more profitable broker positions in networks relative to other positions and relative to less attractive people. Relying on network data supplied by young professionals, in a follow-up study we found that the networks of more attractive people were relatively less dense, as the findings of Study 1 would imply. We discuss the implications for our work as well as highlight the need for further research into an understudied, but potentially influential brokerage contingency factor—physical appeal.

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When it comes to personal and professional success, more attractive people have a clear advantage over their less attractive peers (Hamermesh, 2011). Better looking people tend to have better looking spouses (Feingold, 1988), for instance, and earn better rewards when they appear as contestants on reality television dating shows (BBC News, 2009). At work, too, being attractive pays (Dipboye et al., 1977). Relative to their less attractive peers, more attractive people are more likely to be called back for an interview (Bóo et al., 2013), more likely to be hired (Hosoda et al., 2003), earn more money (Biddle and Hamermesh, 1995; Frieze et al., 1991; Hamermesh and Biddle, 1993), achieve promotion relatively more quickly (Morrow et al., 1990), and, perhaps predictably, are more satisfied with their careers (Hosoda et al., 2003).

Two lines of psychological inquiry help to explain why beauty pays. One focuses on perceivers and how they think about, and consequently treat, attractive people. Studies show that perceivers ascribe a range of (unrelated) positive qualities to an attractive person, believing the attractive person to be relatively more intelligent, more sociable and mentally healthier, for instance (Dion et al., 1972; Eagly et al., 1991; Feingold, 1992; Langlois et al., 2000). Being stereotyped in this positive way benefits better looking people, helping them reach relatively more favorable outcomes.

Another line of research argues that people think and behave differently depending on how attractive they are, which accounts for their outcomes. Experimental and empirical studies document, for instance, that attractive people have relatively better social skills and stronger, more positive self-beliefs compared to their less attractive peers (Judge et al., 2002, 2003, 2009; Mobius and Rosenblat, 2006). These differences, too, explain why being attractive is so beneficial.

With the perceptions and behavior of attractive people as our focus, we draw on psychological research to hypothesize differences in network preferences and structures between people who are more and less attractive. In a laboratory experiment, we test whether attractiveness is linked to people's preferences for positions in networks. In a follow-up correlational study of young professionals, we test whether these preferences translate into differences in the structure of people's social networks, as one would predict. If our claims have merit, then our findings could open up new lines of inquiry into how a neglected attribute of nodes—their physical appeal—is a contingent factor for network activity, and brokerage, in particular.

Why beauty pays

When it comes to pretty faces, there is substantial agreement both within cultures and between them (Feingold, 1992; Langlois et al., 1999). Both men and women with more 'feminized' facial

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features tend to be judged as more attractive than those with less feminized features, though this effect is considerably stronger for women (Perrett et al., 1998). Generally, more feminine male and female faces (versus. less feminine males and females) tend to have fuller lips, larger eyes, a more heart-shaped (versus square) jawline, and higher cheekbones (Thornhill and Gangestad, 1999). Facial symmetry, too, is positively associated with beauty (Grammer and Thornhill, 1999; Møller and Thornhill, 1998). The advantages of being born with these features are significant.

Longitudinal studies show that facial attractiveness—measured early in a person's life—predicts longer-run professional success, including higher employment status and income, for instance (Benzeval et al., 2013; Fletcher, 2009). This “beauty premium” (Hamermesh and Biddle, 1993) transcends industries and national borders with attractiveness predicting higher salaries among American lawyers (Biddle and Hamermesh, 1998), NFL quarterbacks (Berri et al., 2011), and even beauty salon employees in East Asia (Hamermesh, 2011).

In a well-cited meta-analysis of over 900 studies on the effects of physical attractiveness for the outcomes of both children and adults, Langlois et al. (2000) found that, from childhood, more attractive people enjoy much more favorable treatment than their less attractive counterparts. For example, very young children who are more attractive are judged to be relatively better adjusted. Among their peers, these children enjoy greater popularity. These patterns continue into adulthood, with attractive adults treated better by others, enjoying greater positive attention as well as receiving relatively more help and cooperation from other people.

The benefits to being beautiful can be understood as the “what-is-beautiful-is-good” effect (Dion et al., 1972; Eagly et al., 1991).¹ Attractiveness carries a ‘halo,’ with people who are attractive seen as being more interpersonally competent and judged to have greater social appeal relative to less attractive individuals (Langlois et al., 2000). These positive stereotypes can help explain why other people offer attractive people better opportunities (Dion et al., 1972; Langlois et al., 2000; Zebrowitz and Montepare, 2008).

In a related way, stereotypes create their own reality, an effect known as the ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ (Rosenthal and Jacobsen, 1968). People enjoy being in the presence of attractive people, preferring them over others (Byrne et al., 1968; Chatterjee et al., 2009; Eastwick and Finkel, 2008; Garcia et al., 1991; Lemay et al., 2010; Marks et al., 1981; Winston et al., 2007). This preference conspires to give more attractive people greater opportunity for social interaction (Feingold, 1992), leaving them less lonely and less socially anxious than their less attractive peers (Feingold, 1992). More social exposure also translates into greater opportunity hone social skills, and in fact, more attractive people have relatively better communication skills, for instance (Möbius and Rosenblat, 2006).

Relatedly, attractive people also report stronger core self-evaluations—a concept characterized as a general evaluation of a person's sense of competence, deservingness, and control over success in life (Judge et al., 2002; 2003; Judge et al., 2009). Because others treat attractive people as relatively more competent and deserving, this pattern of self-beliefs is not surprising.

With a lifetime of accumulated experience of positive social encounters, as well as stronger core self-evaluations, more attractive people should anticipate being relatively more socially successful. Believing that others will respond positively to their overtures, we argue that more attractive people will judge social opportunities differently than those who are less attractive. In

¹ Others have identified a “beauty is beastly” phenomenon, but this effect appears to be limited to women who work in masculine-typed professions (Heilman and Saruwatari, 1979).

particular, they should be more likely to pursue riskier and more challenging social roles.

Social networks

As the potential value that inheres in people's relationships with one another, social capital is a valuable asset for individuals (Lin, 1999, 2002). Close relationships (i.e., strong ties) with other people, for instance, provide social capital in the form of social and emotional support (Coleman, 1987, 1988, 1994; Portes, 2000; Putnam, 1993), particularly important during times of stress. Networks that features structural holes—spaces between clusters of unconnected groups—also pay dividends. Networks comprising these features offer opportunities for people to act as brokers, positioned to facilitate resource transfer between clusters (Burt, 2005). Not only can this activity build social capital, but also can be a profitable source of rents collected by the broker from the brokered (Burt, 2009; Hofstra et al., 2015; Jasny and Lubell, 2015; Totterdell et al., 2008).

While the benefits of structural holes and tie strength are well known (Burt and Ronchi 2007; Seibert et al., 2001; Collins and Clark, 2003; Argote and Ingram, 2000), the factors that enable these network features are less well understood. Studies show that traits play a role, for instance. People who are high self-monitors—both attentive and adaptive to social cues (Snyder, 1974)—are more likely to occupy broker positions (Mehra et al., 2001; Oh and Kilduff, 2008). Similarly, people who have an internal (as opposed to external) locus of control—seeing themselves as active agents who have the power to shape their environments—are more likely to have networks that comprise structural holes (Kalish and Robins, 2006). Common to both types of people is an understanding of social opportunity and a tendency to adopt an active approach to exploiting those opportunities.

We propose that relatively better looking people should anticipate receptive interaction partners, comparatively smooth and friendly social interactions and, thus, should be more likely to choose positions that carry greater social risk. Compared to less attractive people, more attractive people will be more likely to opt for broker positions in networks.

H1. People who are more attractive are relatively more likely to prefer broker positions in networks.

In a first study, we test whether there is a link between physical attractiveness and preferences for particular network positions.

Study 1

To test our hypothesis, we recruited a sample of 124 MBA participants from an experiment database. 61 percent (76) of the participants were men 39 percent (48) were women. Their average age was 29.06 ($SD = 5.2$; range: 18–49). We told participants:

Today we are asking you to evaluate a social network. You will see a diagram depicting a network of colleagues in a task group for an upcoming experiment to be conducted in the business school.

The circles show positions in the network—where a line exists between two positions, communication and flow of information may occur. If no line exists between 2 positions, then no communication or flow of information may take place

While most of the positions are blue, some are not. It is your job to select for yourself one of the non-blue positions which you would like to occupy. In choosing the position, note that you would not be displacing anyone in that spot—we are still assigning people to different network positions

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