



# Beautiful teaching and good performance☆

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## ABSTRACT

Research on the consequences of being physically attractive during the last century concludes almost unanimously that attractive people do better than less attractive individuals do in most aspects of life. This study tries to determine whether this effect also influences students' perceptions of the performance of higher educational services. A review of relevant literature and subsequent analysis of empirical data from 180 university courses reveals that the perceived physical attractiveness of university instructors positively affects the perceived performance of the instructors and the performance of the university courses they provide in northern Europe.

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## 1. Introduction

*Competence, like truth, beauty and contact lenses, is in the eye of the beholder.*

[Laurence J. Peter (1919–1988).]

Many institutions for higher education nowadays are realizing that they are, in fact, service providers, and consequently that their customers – the students – are the critical factor for their continued survival; thus, no self-respecting university or college wants to overlook the potential possibilities for generating a larger student body (Bok, 2003). To this end, researchers from various academic fields propose a mixture of methods for attracting and retaining students, from education (Hultman & Oghazi, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), to information systems research, to economics and marketing and management (Farr, 2003). However, in spite of the variety of methods available for higher education providers to become more attractive to their customers (e.g., invest in information technology, develop professional management programs, lower the admission fee, etc.), if the institution does not deliver on its core offering – good courses – the institution will never succeed in attracting and retaining students.

This idea goes in line with the recurrent theme within services marketing that proposes that basic quality, understanding, and customer responsiveness in the core offering is imperative for the survival of any

service organization (Shostack, 1977). Another important element in the service offering, which service marketing researchers stress, is the impact of the actual person providing the service (Hoffman & Bateson, 2001). Researchers agree that because of the inherent nature of a service offering, that is, its intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability, and perishability (see Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1985), the quality of the service becomes inseparable from its provider (Berry, 1980; Chase, 1978), or as Shostack (1977) argues: “services are often inextricably entwined with their human representatives. In many fields, a person is perceived to be the service” (p. 79). Analogous results exist within the field of higher education, where research consistently shows a strong connection between the course instructor's performance and overall perceived course quality (e.g. Babad, 2001; Greenbank, 2003; Jones, 1989; Mazzarol & Soutar, 1999; Ramsden, 1994). Consequently, most academic course evaluation instruments have a strong focus on factors such as teaching methods, knowledge, and enthusiasm of the instructors (Chen, 2010; Granzin & Painter, 1973; Hodgson & Spours, 2001; Ramsden, 1994).

However, one item that rarely shows up on academic course evaluation sheets is an evaluation of the instructor's appearance. Although physical appearance should not affect the professional evaluation and quality of an individual (except in cases such as the fashion industry), research shows that physical appearance has an impact in a wide variety of industries. For example, Hoffman and Bateson (2001) claim that Singapore Airlines' reputation is, in large part, due to the beauty and grace of their flight attendants. Furthermore, Berry (1980) explains that the physical appearance of the service provider is a tangible variable that can be managed many service industries, from fitness to aviation, to theme parks, to boost the firm's performance.

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## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. The attractiveness phenomenon

The interest in studying physical attractiveness increases in the 1960s. However, this field progresses slowly because many researchers view attractiveness as a non-egalitarian, superficial, and undemocratic topic not worthy of scientific investigation (Patzner, 1985). Notwithstanding this viewpoint, one cannot disregard that across societies, beauty fascinates and beautiful people attract individuals (Ahearne, Gruen, & Jarvis, 1999). Studies in a variety of disciplines demonstrate that perceived beauty has powerful effects. According to Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, and Longo (1991), the impact of attractiveness is a strong and general phenomenon and, despite its poor reputation, the research stream is gaining some momentum in recent years. Some of the results show that attractive people are more recognizable (Sarno & Alley, 1997) and people consider them more socially and intellectually competent than unattractive people (Eagly et al., 1991). Furthermore, attractive people seem to be better at persuading others (Snyder & Rothbart, 1971) and people think them to be more motivated, decisive, and logical (Dipboye, Arvey, & Terpstra, 1977). This general effect – that in the eyes of others, attractive people appear to possess more favorable traits than unattractive people, is what Dion, Berscheid, and Walster (1972) label the “what is beautiful is good” (p. 285) stereotype.

The implications of this might explain why attractive people seem to do better for themselves in most aspects of life (c.f. Ahearne et al., 1999; Boor, Wartman, & Reuben, 1983; Chiu & Babcock, 2002; DeShields, Kara, & Kaynak, 1996; Ilkka, Kahle & Homer, 1985; Lee, Ribeiro, Olson, & Roig, 2007; Mazis, Ringold, Perry, & Denman, 1992; Ohanian, 1990). Building on their research on adult attributions of infant competence, Stephan and Langlois (1984) even go so far as to claim that the relative physical attractiveness of infant babies affects the attitudes that their parents hold toward them.

### 2.2. The attractiveness concept

Despite all the available research on the effects of physical attractiveness, the concept itself is far from clear. Ohanian (1990) explains that many definitions and operationalizations are available for the concept. A common critique is that many researchers tend to restrict their definitions of attractiveness to the facial area (Abrantes, Seabra, & Lages, 2007; Chiu & Babcock, 2002; Ohanian, 1990). To present a more comprehensive definition of the concept, Chiu and Babcock (2002) define attractiveness to include more than merely facial features; this study adopts this definition: “The degree to which one’s physical and facial image elicits favorable reactions from others” (Chiu & Babcock, 2002, p. 146).

Patzner (1985) concludes that, although physical attractiveness is an abstract concept, and no absolute measures exist, individuals tend to agree in specific judgements of who is – and who is not – attractive.

### 2.3. Attractiveness in higher educational services

Returning to the “what is beautiful is good” stereotype, very few researchers study this effect in the context of service providers and their evaluation (Gabbott & Hogg, 2000). Within the context of higher education, a literature review reveals that four recent studies on related topics. Hamermesh and Parker (2005) examine the productivity effects of beauty in the context of undergraduate education by investigating the effect of instructors’ looks on their instructional ratings. The findings indicate that measures of perceived beauty have a substantial independent positive impact on instructional ratings (Ribeiro-Soriano & Urbano, 2010; Ribeiro-Soriano & Castrogiovanni, 2012). Campbell, Gerdes, and Steiner (2005) challenge Hamermesh and Parker’s (2005) results by adding a number of control variables to the equation.

In addition, a few studies also indirectly touch upon the subject. For example, when investigating the relationships of immediacy and verbal aggression with homophily and interpersonal attraction in the higher education instructional context, Rocca and McCroskey (1999) find a positive correlation between immediacy and attractiveness. Finally, in his investigation of the halo effect in student evaluations of instructors, Feeley (2002) also finds a positive link between ratings of physical attractiveness and ratings of teaching effectiveness.

Although the number of previous studies on the effects of physical attractiveness in services and higher education are few, and they all have various methodological shortcomings (e.g., presumed data: Buck & Tienne, 1989; naturalistic data with lack of respondent information: Felton, Mitchell, & Stinson, 2004; Riniolo, Johnsson, Sherman, & Misso, 2006; and oversimplified conceptualizations of attractiveness: Campbell et al., 2005; Hamermesh & Parker, 2005), they all point in the same direction. This study hypothesizes the following:

**H1.** Perceived physical attractiveness of the instructor has a correlation with perceived instructor performance in higher education.

In addition, because researchers consistently identify strong correlations between the instructor’s performance and the overall perceived course quality (e.g., Babad, 2001; Jones, 1989; Mazzarol & Soutar, 1999; Ramsden, 1994; Richardson et al., 2002), this study poses a second hypothesis:

**H2.** Perceived physical attractiveness of the instructor has a correlation with perceived course performance in higher education.

## 3. Research methods

This study gathered and analyzed empirical data to test these hypotheses. This section describes the procedures used for sampling, survey procedure, instrument development, validation, and data analysis.

### 3.1. Sample and survey procedure

The sampling frame comprised all undergraduate students at a Swedish university, partly for reasons of convenience and accessibility, but also because the demographics of the university students represent a wide diversity of people attending higher education in everything from engineering to social sciences, music, business, healthcare, and teaching. The study developed a combined English and Swedish questionnaire building on the key constructs under investigation. After translating the original English questionnaire into Swedish, an independently back-translation into English ensured item equivalence across the two languages.

Since the units of analysis in this study were university instructors and university courses, the students, here acting as key informants, first thought of the course they had enjoyed the least during the preceding academic year. Then, they responded to a number of questions regarding that particular course and its main instructor using a 7-point rating scale (where 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*, or the various character traits of the main instructor). Students also applied this same procedure to the course they had enjoyed the most.

At the end of the data collection period, 97 respondents had provided information about 180 instructors and courses, resulting in an effective response rate of about 4.9%. However, the high heterogeneity of the education specialties and courses represented by the respondents counteracts the low response rate (see Appendix A for some key demographic information). No significant differences appeared between early and late respondent, therefore the occurrence of non-response bias was likely not an issue for this survey (Armstrong & Overton, 1977).

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