

Research & Knowledge

Do we live in a world in which appearance matters?

Plato and Golda Meir were not really good looking, but gosh, they were smart, and their influence is still hovering over us today. Still, I think I may have given them a lower grade at their oral exam on bookkeeping—a topic that I was teaching a couple of years ago—then to Kim Kardashian even if some—not all, I always tried to be honest—of her answers were wrong.

Yes indeed, this is a fact of life that has repeatedly been observed over the years, and that has become part of the literature in economics and psychology even before economist Hamermesh's (2011) *Beauty Pays: Why Attractive People Are More Successful* or psychologist Hakim's *Honey Money: Why Attractiveness is Key to Success* had written their books.

Good looks are a great asset

Some findings even suggest that personality judgments made from facial cues of young adults have some *predictive* power and can be used to detect intellectual abilities that lead to be successful at some later stage. The problem is whether beauty cues do really predict intelligence, or whether once you look beautiful, those who judge you later (and you still look beautiful...) keep thinking that you are also clever because you were successful.

So beauty would not *predict* intelligence, but simply be correlated in the minds of those who have to select, rank or grade. Though the final result is the same—those who are good looking are more successful—beauty does not *cause* intelligence, even if as Myers (2005) writes, “good looks are a great asset.”



Hundreds of papers have been written on various facets of this issue. Beauty is correlated with higher wages and better employment in civilian but also in military settings (though I do not find that generals are usually good looking), while overweight has a negative impact (and generals often are fat). Good-looking people are better leaders, and the firms they manage experience better

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financial performance. Hamermesh (2006) even finds correlations between the success of talented economists and their beauty! Physical attractiveness is important in teaching jobs, and good-looking teachers earn more and get better ratings by students (and inversely, as I alluded to above). Good-looking people are happier than ugly people.

Physically attractive female authors are rated significantly more talented (by male judges...). Women's beauty is (fortunately) no longer a handicap for some managerial jobs, even if for high status jobs, sexy (or sexy-dressed) women are rated as being less competent than the same women dressed in business-like manner.

Correlation but not causality

Sex and beauty thus seem to be correlated, and since beauty is 'easier' to observe or detect than intelligence, intelligence judgments are based on beauty, but none of them can be shown to cause the other. But what is beauty?

In a recent paper Gergaud, Ginsburgh and Livat (GGL) (2016) analyze data of an original

survey collected and compiled by *Epoll Market Research* that provides thorough information on how 3,620 American celebrities are perceived by a representative sample of the American population. These celebrities are prominent people in fields like cinema, sports, music, business, politics, ..., and perceived beauty encompasses a set of 11 personal characteristics describing attractiveness and attitude that are linked to physical beauty, but not only to facial beauty, as is usually the case in experiments run by psychologists; these characteristics (or cues) are attractiveness, beauty, charm, class, cuteness, excitingness, glamour, handsomeness, physical fitness, sexiness, and style. GGL correlate intelligence scores with scores on these 11 attributes, and show that being judged classy or charming is positively associated with intelligence whereas looking cute, physically fit, or sexy sends a negative signal about cognitive skills.

Their contribution to the field is new since it takes into account a large number of judges and judgments (almost 14,000) of some 3,600 people who are described by gender and profession (athletes, comedians, fashion models, film personalities, musicians, politicians and TV personalities), whereas most studies, usually carried out by psychologists, are experiments with a small number of judges and subjects. Thus here the correlations between perceived intelligence and each of the 11 perceived beauty cues are computed on a large number of observations.



The table included below summarizes the results by displaying the sign of correlation coefficients between intelligence, and beauty cues for each of the above-mentioned professions. As can be seen, less than 50% (34/77) of these correlations are positive and significantly different from 0, which means that one has to be careful before speaking about positive correlation between intelligence and beauty. Once beauty is disaggregated among (some of) its components, this result is less obvious.

Correlation coefficients between intelligence and beauty cues										
	Athletes	Comedians	Fashion	Film pers.	Musicians	Politicians	TV pers.	Total +	Total -	Total 0
Attractive	+	+	0	-	+	0	-	3	2	2
Beautiful	0	0	0	-	0	0	-	0	2	5
Charming	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	7	0	0
Classy	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	7	0	0
Cute	0	0	0	-	-	0	-	0	3	4
Exciting	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	7	0	0
Glamorous	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	0	1	6
Handsome	+	+	0	+	+	0	+	5	0	2
Physically fit	-	0	0	0	0	0	-	0	2	5
Sexy	0	0	-	-	0	0	-	0	3	4
Stylish	+	+	+	0	+	+	-	5	1	1
Total +	6	6	4	4	6	4	4	34		
Total -	1	0	1	4	1	0	7		14	
Total 0	4	5	6	3	4	7	0			29

+ is positive correlation; - is negative correlation; 0 is correlation not significantly different from 0 (p < 0.001)

How should you behave?

Some other features in the table are worth pointing out. First, there is either no or, worse, negative correlation between being intelligent and cute, or glamorous, or sexy or physically fit. So indeed, avoid these characteristics in your behavior, and better be charming, classy and exciting (intellectually, I mean). If you want to be a politician and look clever (which is often difficult), be sure to be charming (like our prime minister), classy (like our former prime minister), exciting (like every politician, including François Hollande) and stylish (like Donald Trump).

Performing advanced and applied research is one of the main mission of the Solvay Brussels School. Two Ph.D. programs host every year about 120 doctoral students.

The "econometric" techniques and (poor) data crunching used in this paper are taught at SBSEM in several degrees. They help to distinguish correlation from causality.

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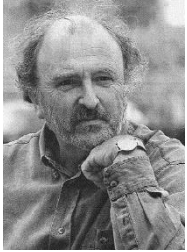
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