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Are Good-Looking People More Employable? Findings Vary Depending on Whether It's a Male or Female Applicant and Who's Doing the Screening

"Good looks" are only sometimes a positive factor in consideration for a job, according to new research from Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (BGU). In the new working paper, "Are Good-Looking People More Employable?" two economics researchers from BGU prove that a double standard exists between good looks as a positive factor in men and women.

The research involved sending 5,312 CVs (resumes) in pairs to 2,656 advertised job openings in Israel. In each pair, one CV was without a picture while the second, otherwise almost identical CV, contained a picture of either an attractive male/female or a plain-looking male/female. The dependent measure was whether the employer e-mails or calls back the candidate for an interview. Overall, the response rate was 14.5 percent.

"Unlike Anglo-Saxon countries such as the U.S., Canada, Australia and the U.K, it isn't taboo in Israel to embed a headshot of oneself in the top corner of one's job resume," explains BGU economics researcher and lecturer Dr. Bradley Ruffle. "Rather, the choice to include a photograph on one's job resume is left to the candidate with the result that some do, while others don't. This fact makes Israel an opportune location to explore the effect of a picture and its attractiveness, or lack thereof, on the likelihood of being invited for a job interview.

"To the best of our knowledge, this is the first paper to explore beauty discrimination in the hiring process of an actual labor market, rather than a laboratory market or hypothetical decision scenario," Ruffle continues.

The resumes of "attractive" males received a 19.9 percent response rate, nearly 50 percent higher than the 13.7 percent response rate for "plain" males and more than twice the 9.2 percent response rate of no-picture males.

"It follows that an attractive male needs to send on average five CVs in order to obtain one response, whereas a plain-looking male needs to send 11 for a single response," explains Ze'ev Shtudiner, co-researcher and Ph.D. candidate. However, among women, the BGU study indicates that, contrary to popular belief, "attractive" women are called back for a position LESS often than "plain women" (unattractive), as well as women who had no picture on their resume.

"Among female candidates, no-picture females have the highest response rate, 22 percent higher than plain females and 30 percent higher than attractive females. Our findings on penalization of attractive women contradict current psychology and organizational behavior literature on beauty that associate attractiveness, male and female alike, with almost every conceivable positive trait and disposition," explain the authors.

As a result, attractive and plain women alike are better off omitting their photograph from a resume since it decreases their chances of a callback by 20 to 30 percent.

The number of attractive women that were subjected to discrimination varied on who was hiring them, the research shows. When employment agencies received resumes for positions, attractive female candidates were no worse off than plain candidates and penalized only modestly compared to no-picture females.

However, when the corporation at which the candidate might work recruited directly, attractive females received a response rate of about half that of plain and no-picture women. This is likely due to the high number of women in human resources staffing positions, the researchers conclude.

To verify this stereotype, the researchers conducted a post-experiment survey in which they spoke with the person at the company who screens candidates. That person was female in 24 of the 25 (96 percent) of the companies they interviewed. Moreover, these women were young (ranging in age from 23 to 34 with an average age of 29) and typically single (67 percent) -- qualities more likely to be associated with a jealous response when confronted with a young, attractive competitor in the workplace.

"Indeed, the evidence points to female jealousy of attractive women in the workplace as a primary reason for their penalization in recruitment," Ruffle states.