

# How Female Physical Attractiveness Affects Others' Judgments of Personality and Ability in a Simulated Recruitment Situation

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Appearance is an important factor that affects how we feel and think about others. Previous studies have shown that physically attractive people are rated more favorably in political, legal and managerial settings than less attractive people. This experimental study was conducted to investigate whether one's level of facial attractiveness affected one's personality and ability ratings by others in a simulated recruitment context and whether the gender of the raters moderated this relationship. **Method:** A total of 88 university students (44 females) from the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University-HCM, were randomly divided into two groups: either read a profile of an attractive female candidate for a job vacancy or an unattractive female candidate with the same profile and the same vacancy. The participants were then asked to evaluate the candidate's personality characteristics, the chance of being shortlisted for a job interview, and suggested a starting salary. **Results:** The personality of the more attractive candidate was rated significantly more positive than that of the unattractive candidate. The gender of the raters did not moderate this rating, suggesting that both male and female participants were similarly influenced by the candidate's appearance. No significant differences in the ratings for shortlisting likelihood and starting salary were found. **Conclusion:** This study has provided some experimental evidence that Vietnamese young adults tend to give more favorable ratings of personality to a person with high facial attractiveness. This shows the need to consider removing the requirement of profile image in job applications if it is not utterly necessary and raises awareness of potential bias among recruiters to minimize appearance discrimination during the recruitment process.

**Key words:** halo effect, physical attractiveness, recruitment, job interview, starting salary, personality assessment, gender difference

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## INTRODUCTION

A person's physical appearance is one of the most recognizable and noticeable features to others in social interaction and communication. Previous studies have shown that one's physical appearance has a significant role in voting results<sup>1</sup>, sentencing decisions<sup>2,3</sup> and the success of executives<sup>4</sup>. In general, these findings suggest that a more attractive appearance is associated with more positive and lenient judgments by other people. This phenomenon was noted first by Thorndike in 1920<sup>5</sup>, in which it was called the "halo effect". It was later recognized as a cognitive bias, whereby our overall impression of a person affects how we perceive and judge that person's characteristics in other settings.

Previous studies on the halo effect have shown that attractive looks are often rated more positively than unattractive looks in terms of personality and competence. Dion et al.<sup>6</sup> found supporting evidence for the "beautiful is good" stereotype that physically attractive people are not only thought to possess many

desirable characteristics but are also expected to be happier and more successful than unattractive people in life, marriage, and career. Landy and Sigall conducted an experiment investigating the effect of female appearance on men's judgments of their essay writing<sup>7</sup>. The results showed that male participants judged the more attractive author's essay more favorably than the essay of the unattractive author. In addition, the more visually appealing the author, the higher the participants' judgment of their intellectual abilities, talents, and literary sensibility were. Another experiment on the managerial competence of attractive people was carried out by Dipboye et al.<sup>8</sup> on 60 participants, including university students and professional interviewers. They were asked to evaluate 12 résumés based on a job description for the head of a furniture department position. It was found that 81% of the participants gave the highest rankings for the attractive candidate in terms of suitability for management positions. In terms of recruitment, given two candidates with the exact same profile standard (based on the recommendations of the University of

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Canterbury Careers Advisory Service) but who only differed in terms of having an attractive profile photo, the profile attached with an attractive photo was more likely to be invited for an interview<sup>9</sup>.

One possible explanation for the correlation between outer appearance and inner characteristics was proposed by Dion et al.<sup>6</sup>, in which they suggest that certain personality characteristics might influence a person's look. For example, a calm, relaxed person may have fewer eye wrinkles than someone who is usually stressed and irritable, or a humorous person may show more wrinkles around their mouth. These facial features can be quickly detected by others and may influence their judgments in situations where they lack information or time to properly assess a person's characteristics as a function of the halo effect.

In addition, social psychologists believe that the link between appearance and people judgment is due to the process of socialization of stereotypes. According to socialization theory, Langlois et al. suggest that beauty standards, which are socially constructed by cultures, will affect people's perception, thinking and behavior, resulting in social stereotypes of attractive people<sup>10</sup>. One cause of this stems from the entertainment industry<sup>11,12</sup>. For example, protagonists in movies with "good" characteristics or competence often tend to be good-looking, while antagonists with "bad" characteristics or intentions tend to have a less attractive appearance. Smith, McIntosh and Bazzini<sup>13</sup> suggest that cinematography significantly reflects the stereotype of "beautiful is good" and reinforces this stereotype in viewers. Every day, this reinforcement continues through advertisements that often convey messages that consistently link "attractive" with "good", "happy" and "successful". As a result, cognitive dissonance may arise when a mismatch appears, such as matching "beautiful" and "bad", because of our tendency to make our perception consistent with our beliefs<sup>14,15</sup>. To resolve this dissonance and thus the discomfort caused by it, people tend to reinforce again the perception that attractive people will possess more desirable qualities and unattractive people will possess fewer desirable qualities.

Lemay, Clark and Greenberg<sup>16</sup> have another hypothesis. They proposed that people give positive judgments of attractive people because they wish to be attached to them. Physical attractiveness is a stimulus that evokes positive responses and emotions in the perceiver, creating a desire to establish close relationships with the subject. This then causes people to make positive predictions about personality characteristics and idealize attractive individuals to create a

sense of security, satisfaction and convenience to connect with them. In other words, Lemay et al.<sup>16</sup> suggest that the desire to be connected with attractive people is a mediator, explaining why attractive people often obtain more favorable judgments.

Parallel to the "beautiful is good" view, an ecological approach has been used to explain why unattractive people receive more negative responses. Environmentally adaptive mechanisms allow humans to recognize individuals with bad genes and diseases through appearance. Faces that are unattractive, asymmetrical, aged, or not compatible with gender stereotypes (feminine/masculine) tend to resemble abnormal, unhealthy and inappropriate<sup>17</sup>. A study by Zebrowitz and Rhodes<sup>18</sup> tested the bad gene hypothesis and found that although a high level of attractiveness, fitness, or masculinity did not necessarily indicate higher levels of intelligence or health, unattractiveness, low symmetry, or low masculinity did signal low ability and quality as measured by the IQ test and health scores. This implies that beautiful is not necessarily good, but ugly is definitely bad.

Nonetheless, there is a lack of empirical evidence for the relationship between appearance and personal judgment in Vietnam, especially in the field of recruitment and selection. In Vietnam, qualitative evidence that is frequently yielded in the Vietnamese literature, folklore and anthropology suggests that appearance is of paramount importance in regard to high-stakes decisions such as choosing spouses ("tâm sinh tướng" - What a person is on the inside will reveal his or her outer appearance). For example, proverbs such as "Trông mặt mà bắt hình dong" ("judging a book by its cover" in English) suggest that a person's characteristics are associated with his or her appearance. Some folk songs imply the association between a good look and good personality in women, such as "Những người thắt đáy lưng ong/Vừa khéo chiều chồng vừa khéo nuôi con" (women with small waists and a fit body are good at taking care of her husband and child). On the other hand, similar messages can be found for unattractive appearance and bad characteristics. For example, the sentence "Phụ nữ mắt trắng môi thâm/Vĩ chẳng hại chồng thì cũng hại con" (women with goggle eyes and dark-colored lips are often remarried). Regarding this topic, Pham Thu Yen wrote in her book "Những thế giới nghệ thuật ca dao" (The Worlds of Folk Arts): "Điều quan trọng là cái đẹp hình thức bao giờ cũng được gắn bó chặt chẽ với vẻ đẹp nội dung, vẻ đẹp tính tình trong quan niệm thẩm mỹ của người lao động" (The important thing is that the beauty of form is always closely linked to the beauty of content, the beauty of personality in the aesthetic conception of workers)

[<sup>19</sup>, p.133]. Such expressions in the Vietnamese literature manifest the socialization of physical attractiveness stereotypes, especially in women, which has been upheld for a long time in Vietnamese culture. In today's world, with the rapid development of medical and nonmedical interventions for appearance and facial features, job seekers face more pressure to become ideal candidates not only in terms of working competency but also in terms of appearance<sup>8,9</sup>. The socialization process of having culturally accepted appearance is likely to influence the recruitment process as well, as job seekers are often required to include a profile picture in their job application. However, without quantitative evidence that is especially drawn from experimental studies, such an assumption is still tentative and not confirmed.

In the literature, the majority of quantitative research on this topic comes from Western cultures [e.g.,<sup>1-4</sup>]. To our knowledge, no study has yet tested the halo effect of physical attractiveness in a recruitment setting in Vietnam. By having more empirical evidence of this bias, better policy making can be informed by research to ensure equality and diversity in regard to job seeking and application. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the relationship between women's appearance and how others judge them during a recruitment process. Our research questions are as follows: (1) Is the more attractive candidate rated more favorably in terms of her personality and potential for the job? and (2) Will these ratings differ if the rater is a man or a woman? An experiment will be conducted with a convenience sample of university students. Participants will read two exact profiles of two hypothetical candidates, one with an attractive profile photo and one with an unattractive photo. They will then judge the candidates' personality, chance of being short-listed for interview, and estimated starting salary. Due to the halo effect, we hypothesize that (H1) the female candidate with a more attractive profile photo in her CV will be rated more favorably by the participants in terms of personalities than the less attractive female candidate, (H2) the physically attractive candidate will be perceived to have a higher chance of being shortlisted and offered a higher starting salary, and (H3) male participants' judgments will be more influenced by the candidates' appearance, resulting in higher ratings for the attractive candidate than female participants.

## METHOD

### Participants and Procedure

A total of 88 participants (44 females) from the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, VNU-

HCM, were voluntarily reached through a post of recruitment on Facebook. Participants gave their consent after being introduced to the experiment. To blind them from the real intention, the participants were told that this study was to investigate how using colors on CVs may affect job prospects. They were then given the CVs printed on hard, colored paper to read for two minutes. Then, the participants were asked to complete their ratings on the candidate's personality characteristics, chance of being short-listed and starting salary. The experiment was completed with the participants being debriefed about the true purpose of the study. Finally, they were given a snack worth 5.000 VND as a thank you gift for joining the experiment. Details of the sample characteristics are reported in the Results section.

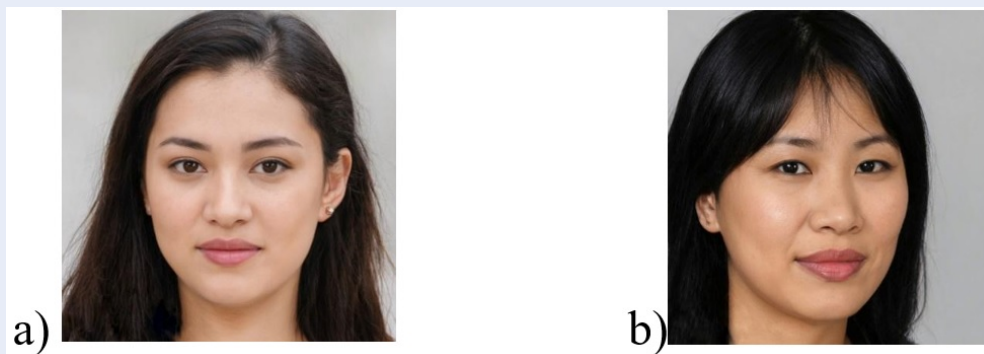
### Stimuli

#### Curriculum vitae (CV)

Two CVs were created using the classic template available on the Topcv.vn website. The vacant position that the CVs were written for was "Accountant", supposedly an office job that does not require much social interaction and a high level of physical attractiveness. On both CVs, the candidate's name is "Nguyễn Thị Linh". All other information on educational level, work experience, social activities, and skills on the two CVs is the same, except for the profile photo. Thus, this experimental study had a between-subject design of 2 (participants' gender: male and female) × 2 (attractiveness of female candidates: attractive and unattractive).

#### Candidate profile photos

Ten portraits of black haired Asian women were randomly selected from the Generated.photos website. This website creates photos by artificial intelligence and allows them to be used for noncommercial and research purposes<sup>20</sup>. An independent group of 10 university students rated these portraits' attractiveness on a scale from 1 (very unattractive), 5 (neither unattractive nor attractive) to 9 (very attractive). These raters did not join the main testing, i.e., rating candidates on their personality and job prospects in this experiment. Based on these ratings, two portraits with the highest mean score ( $M = 7.1$ ,  $SD = 2.08$ , Figure 1a) and lowest mean score ( $M = 5.2$ ,  $SD = 2.04$ , Figure 1b) were selected as profile pictures on the two CVs. Paired samples  $t$  test analysis showed that there was a significant difference in the mean attractiveness ratings of these two portraits,  $t(9) = 5.46$ ,  $p < .001$ . These photos are shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: The two profile photos used in the experiment.** Note: Figure a) shows the highest rated photo, figure b) shows the lowest rated photo in terms of attractiveness.

### Measures

For the participants to judge the candidates' personality, this study adopted the Personality Scale used in Lucker et al.<sup>21</sup>. This scale contains 12 dichotomous items that can be rated on a nine-point scale. These items include "Unintelligent – Intelligent", "Cold – Warm", "Unassured – Assured", "Unambitious – Ambitious", "Unsexy – Sexy", "Sad – Happy", "Friendly – Hostile" (reversed item), "Nonthreatening – Threatening", "Not conceited – Conceited", "Incompetent – Competent", "Feminine – Masculine", and "Passive – Active". A higher score indicates more positive ratings. The minimum score of this scale is 12, and the maximum score is 108. The Cronbach's alpha for internal consistency of the scale in our sample is 0.736. For the participants to predict the candidates' likelihood of being shortlisted, a one-item scale was developed by the authors. The participants responded to the question "Based on this CV, evaluate the possibility that the candidate will be invited for a face-to-face interview" on a Likert scale from 1 (not very likely) to 9 (very likely). Similarly, to measure the predicted salary for the candidates, the participants responded to the question "Based on this CV, please predict the starting salary that the candidate is likely to receive" on a Likert scale from 1 (5 million VND/month) to 6 (10 million VND/month). The order of the scales was: Lucker's personality scale, prediction of short-listing likelihood, and prediction of starting salaries.

### RESULTS

Sample characteristics are presented in **Table 1**. Over half of the sample (52.3%) were sophomores, while only 4.5% were final-year students. A total of 67% of the participants said that they had never processed job applications of other people. When asked about

which aspects of a candidate are most desirable in work settings, including skills, educational level, and appearance, 84.1% of the participants suggested skills, 12.5% suggested educational level, and only 3.4% suggested appearance.

To examine the effect of facial attractiveness on candidates' judgments and whether this effect was moderated by the gender of the raters, two-way independent design MANOVA was performed in SPSS version 20<sup>22</sup>. Preliminary analyses showed that the data were normally distributed. The data also met the assumption of homogeneity of covariance (Box's  $M = 8.54, p = .98$ ).

The results of multivariate ANOVA showed a significant main effect of facial attractiveness, Wilk's  $\Lambda = .87, F(3,82) = 4.14, p = .009$ , observed power = .83. Gender did not moderate this effect, Wilk's  $\Lambda = .99, F(3,82) = 0.04, p = .99$ , suggesting that men and women did not differ in all ratings of the candidates.

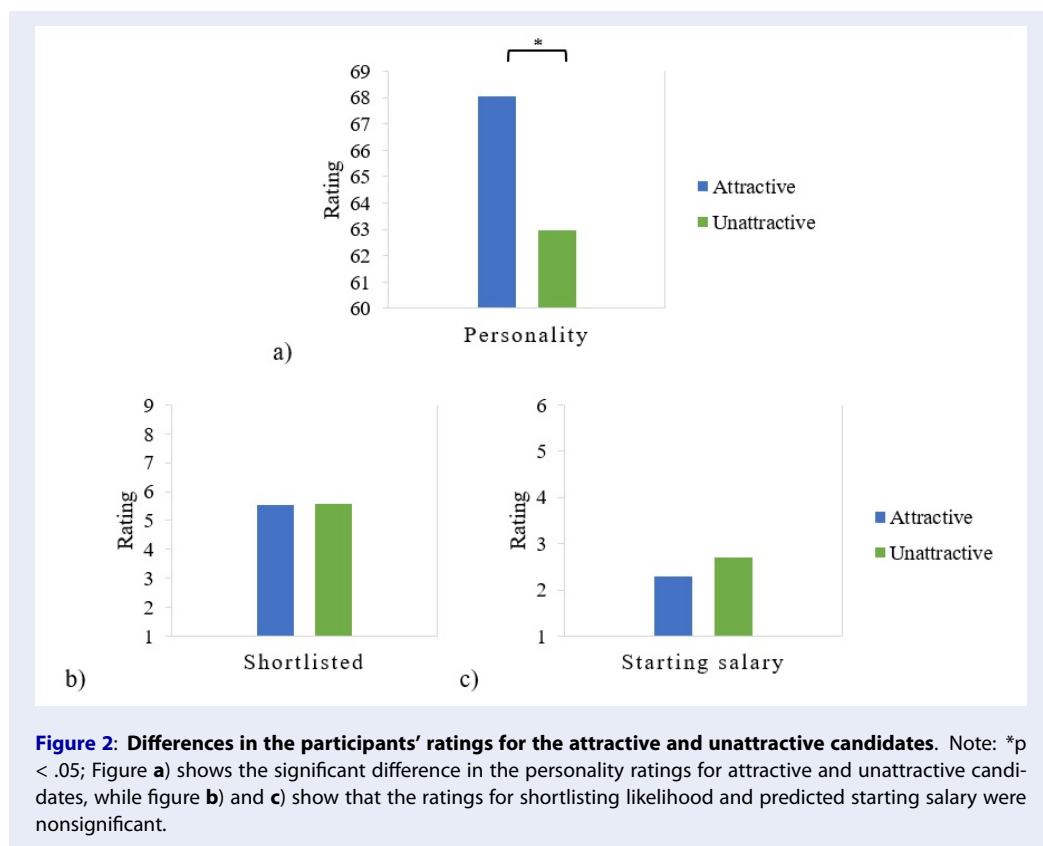
Univariate analysis showed that facial attractiveness significantly influenced personality assessment,  $F(1,84) = 5.67, p = .02$  with medium effect size  $\eta_p^2 = .06$  and low observed power = .65. Specifically, the more attractive candidate was rated more favorably in terms of personality ( $M = 68.05, SD = 9.71$ ) than the less attractive candidate ( $M = 62.96, SD = 10.23$ ). Figure 2 illustrates this difference. The predicted likelihood for short-listing and starting salary did not differ between groups. These results suggested that personality ratings, but not predicted potential and salary estimates, were influenced by facial attractiveness.

### DISCUSSION

This study has provided some quantitative evidence from a laboratory experiment of how the facial attractiveness of candidates influences other people's

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics for sample characteristics**

	Male (n = 44)		Female (n = 44)	
Nominal data		%		%
Academic year				
First year	8	18.2	23	52.3
Second year	27	61.3	19	43.2
Third year	5	11.4	2	4.5
Final year	4	9.1	0	0.0
Experience in CV evaluation				
Not yet	25	56.8	34	77.3
Used to	19	43.2	10	22.7
Rated most desirable factor in a candidate				
Appearance	3	6.8	0	0.0
Educational	4	9.1	7	20.1
Skills	37	84.1	37	79.9



**Figure 2: Differences in the participants' ratings for the attractive and unattractive candidates.** Note: \*p < .05; Figure a) shows the significant difference in the personality ratings for attractive and unattractive candidates, while figure b) and c) show that the ratings for shortlisting likelihood and predicted starting salary were nonsignificant.



judgments of their personality characteristics. On the other hand, the facial attractiveness of candidates did not affect the ratings of shortlisting likelihood and predicted starting salary. Gender also did not have a significant moderating effect.

The effect of appearance on personality judgments is found to be consistent with previous studies<sup>6,7</sup>. The sample of this study is university students who were recruited on a social media platform (Facebook), suggesting that young adults who have diverse opportunities and approaches to recreational social media can be influenced by stereotypes about appearance and inner quality<sup>11,12</sup>. As such, physical attractiveness has been considered a driving force behind discrimination in evaluating individuals<sup>23</sup>. Stone and Wright found that candidates with facial disfigurements will receive fewer opportunities for preselective recruitment, similarly for those with physical disabilities who are confined to wheelchairs. These people tend to receive less favorable and more restrictive responses than typical-looking people, especially for jobs that require frequent contact and relations with customers. In Vietnam, although there has yet to be specific psychological research on appearance discrimination in recruitment, we found an article by Huynh Tri An that aims to analyze the application of big data and artificial intelligence in the automation of human resource recruitment<sup>24</sup>. The author believes that appearance can be a factor that affects the subjective perception of employers, making them more likely to miss out on potentially competent candidates and reduce the success of recruitment.

While most of the student participants in this study reported that they would value skills the most in the professional and occupational contexts, especially soft skills and field-relevant skills, our results showed that appearance still has a significant impact on their judgments of the candidates. Although only personality ratings were influenced by appearance while other job-related aspects such as possibility for being shortlisted and estimation of starting salary were not, this still suggests that the CV readers did pay attention to the candidates' profile photo and were influenced by it. While more favorable ratings of personality do not necessarily guarantee successful job applications, our findings are consistent with Berscheid and Walster's, in which they also observed that people are not fully aware of or not completely honest in their self-report of the importance of physical attractiveness and its effect on them<sup>25</sup>. Our study showed that this effect of appearance on perceived personality can also happen in the field of work and recruitment, even in a university student sample who has not had much work experience.

Contrary to the results of Landy<sup>7</sup>, our study found no gender bias in men's and women's judgments of female candidates, as the gender of the CV raters did not moderate how they judged the candidates' personalities. However, this finding is consistent with others<sup>11,26</sup>, in which no difference between men and women in terms of being influenced by a person's attractiveness was reported. This shows that both men and women are similarly influenced by appearance in regard to judging the personality of someone merely based on attractive looks.

Several limitations should be discussed. First, our study only used female profile photos to depict female candidates. It would be interesting to further test whether people are also affected by the attractiveness of a male profile photo in terms of judging his personality. Second, generalization of the findings is limited because this study was conducted on a sample of university students who were not professional recruiters and might not be aware of the halo effect in recruitment. Due to financial funding and time constraints, it was not feasible to recruit a sample of professional recruiters for the experiment. Thus, future studies can extend the evidence by investigating whether this effect still exists in professional recruiters who might be aware of and receive training on the halo effect or other cognitive biases during the applicant selection process for both male and female applicants.

In short, the results of this study suggest that there are some ways to reduce discrimination based on appearance during CV scanning, such as not requiring profile photos attached in the CVs for job positions that do not require appearance and providing training for professional recruiters about the halo effect and related cognitive biases that might occur and hinder objective judgments.

## CONCLUSION

This experiment was conducted on a sample of university students to investigate the impact of females' facial attractiveness on CV assessment, including personality assessment, shortlisting likelihood and starting salary estimation. We observed a significant effect of facial attractiveness on personality judgment during CV scanning, which simulated an early stage of selection and recruitment. No gender differences were found, suggesting that men and women are affected by females' appearance similarly in regard to judging personality. However, facial attractiveness did not influence the judgment of work potential indicated by shortlisting and starting salary prediction. Our study has provided the first experimental evidence

that Vietnamese young adults perceive a person's personality more favorably if the person has high facial attractiveness, even when they have not met them in person. These results can be of reference value for future studies. To further replicate these results, we suggest that future research investigate the effect of facial attractiveness on both male and female candidates and on other samples, such as professional recruiters.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CV: Curriculum Vitae

IQ: Intelligence quotient

SPSS: Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

VNU-HCM: Vietnam National University – Ho Chi Minh City

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Conception: D.T.H.A., B.M.M.T., T.H.S.V., N.H.T.T. ; methodology: V.B.P., D.T.H.A., B.M.M.T., T.H.S.V., N.H.T.T. ; acquisition of data: D.T.H.A., B.M.M.T., T.H.S.V., N.H.T.T. ; data analysis and interpretation: V.B.P., D.T.H.A., tables and visualization: B.M.M.T. ; writing-draft: D.T.H.A., B.M.M.T., T.H.S.V., N.H.T.T ; writing-review and editing: V.B.P.

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