

The Beauty Penalty (vs. Premium)

Meng Zhu

Tingting Nian

Joachim Vosgerau

Discrimination in favor of attractive workers—the so-called beauty premium—is a robust phenomenon. The current research provides the initial documentation of a beauty penalty. Specifically, results from three experiments reveal that people believe attractive individuals possess better social skills but worse analytical skills than unattractive individuals. These beliefs lead people to discriminate in favor of attractive individuals when social skills are more important, but to discriminate against attractive individuals when analytical skills are more important. Further, analyzing field data from Stack Overflow, a prominent question and answer site for programmers, we find evidence (across a random sample of 400,000 users) of both a beauty penalty and a beauty premium in the actual marketplace. Among programmers with low reputation scores, unattractive programmers are treated more favorably than attractive ones; this pattern reversed for programmers with high reputation scores. Taken together, the three key insights from the current research are (1) The beauty premium may be less universal than previously assumed: people may discriminate negatively (vs. positively) against attractive workers when analytical skills (vs. social skills) are judged as more important; (2) Even within analytical domains, both beauty penalty and beauty premium might occur, depending on workers' reputation history (3) The discrimination based on beauty—a beauty penalty or a beauty premium— arises from misspecified, biased beliefs.