
Beauty Value Research Review

Research about the value of Beauty

compiled by Stephen Drew, AIR staff

The plaintive lament “I’d give anything to be beautiful” is, on its face, all about economics. That’s how some people see it, anyway. And those people, many of them, want you to see it that way, too.

Several researchers have taken the public’s sometimes naïve notion of Beauty, and given it a makeover – a head-to-toe, full-body-of-research makeover. Here are several published studies done by people who truly, professionally, obsess about Beauty.

Economics and Beauty

Is it fair that some people are beautiful while others are less so? No one has tackled that question scientifically, but David Van Praag Marks looked hard at the more limited topic of how that Beauty is distributed throughout the various parts of society. He looked so hard that it got him a doctorate.

“Human Beauty: An Economic Analysis,” David Van Praag Marks, Dissertation – Harvard University, 1989. The author explains that:

This thesis examines the economic implications of the unequal distribution of beauty in society.

Dr. Marks, by the way, is also the co-author of the 1983 book *Competition in the Investment Banking Industry*, a work that is consistently, if subtly, suffused with concepts of economic Beauty.

Beauty’s Professions

What are the vocational interests of beautiful women? Science can tell us this. Science *has* told us this. So says industrial psychologist David P. Campbell, who carefully examined 100 professional-grade beautiful women.

“The Vocational Interests of Beautiful Women,” David P. Campbell, *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, vol. 45, no. 10, 1967, pp. 968-72. (Thanks to Patricia T. Wolper for bringing this to our attention.) The author explains that he:

Analyzes the SVIB [Strong Vocational Interest Blank] scores of 100 fashion models. Their interest patterns reflect preferences for the dramatic over the routine, the unstructured over the structured. They favor verbal occupations, and show aversion toward working with numbers in precise, disciplined settings. They prefer activities allowing them to take advantage of their attractiveness.

The Discoveries of Hamermesh

In the world of professional economists, one man leads the Beauty parade. University of Texas at Austin economics professor Daniel S. Hamermesh has published five landmark studies for connoisseurs.

First, he published a study about how Beauty works.

“Beauty and the Labor Market,” Daniel S. Hamermesh and Jeff E. Biddle, *American Economic Review*, vol. 84, no. 5, December 1994, pp. 1174-94. Professors Hamermesh and Biddle explain that:

[P]lain people earn less than people of average looks, who earn less than the good-looking. The penalty for plainness is 5 to 10 percent, slightly larger than the

Beauty and the Labor Market

By DANIEL S. HAMERMESH AND JEFF E. BIDDLE*

We examine the impact of looks on earnings using interviewers' ratings of respondents' physical appearance. Plain people earn less than average-looking people, who earn less than the good-looking. The plainness penalty is 5–10 percent, slightly larger than the beauty premium. Effects for men are at least as great as for women. Unattractive women have lower labor-force participation rates and marry men with less human capital. Better-looking people sort into occupations where beauty may be more productive; but the impact of individual looks is mostly independent of occupation, suggesting the existence of pure employer discrimination. (JEL J71, J10)

He [Aristotle] used to say that personal beauty was a better introduction than any letter.

—Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives and Opinions of the Eminent Philosophers* (ca. 200 A.D.)

Discrimination in the labor market has generated immense amounts of research by economists. Many alternative theoretical

produced.¹ Our purpose here is to offer the first study of the economics of discrimination in the labor market against yet another group—the ugly—and its obverse, possible favoritism for the beautiful. We examine whether there is a reduced-form combination of attitudes toward beauty and a distribution of workers among jobs that generates apparently discriminatory labor-market outcomes.



Beauty researcher Daniel S. Hamermesh.

premium for beauty. The effects are slightly larger for men than women; but unattractive women are less likely than others to participate in the labor force and are more likely to be married to men with unexpectedly low human capital. Better-looking people sort into occupations where beauty is likely to be more productive, but the impact of individuals' looks on their earnings is mostly independent of occupation.

Professor Hamermesh then turned to the courtroom.

"Beauty, Productivity and Discrimination: Lawyers' Looks and Lucre," Jeff Biddle and Daniel Hamermesh, *Journal of Labor Economics*, vol. 16, 1998, pp. 172-201. Professors Biddle and Hamermesh explain that:

[We looked at] longitudinal data on a large sample of attorneys who graduated from one law school. Beauty is measured by ratings of their matriculation photographs.

- 1) Better-looking attorneys who graduated in the 1970s earned more after 5 years of practice than their worse-looking classmates, other things equal, an effect that grew even larger by the fifteenth year of practice. There is no impact of beauty on earnings among 1980s graduates.
- 2) Attorneys in the private sector are better looking than those in the public sector, with the differences rising as workers sort across sector based on their beauty.
- 3) Male attorneys' probability of attaining an early partnership rises with beauty.... We cannot determine whether this is because clients discriminate or because better-looking lawyers are able to obtain greater pecuniary gains for their clients.

From there, Professor Hamermesh zoomed off to look at the value of Beauty in a fast-growing economy.

“Dress for Success –Does Primping Pay?” Daniel S. Hamermesh, Xin Meng and Junsen Zhang, *NBER Working Paper* No. w7167, June 1999. Professor Hamermesh and two colleagues explain that:

A unique survey of Shanghai residents in 1996 that combined labor-market information, appraisals of respondents’ beauty, and household expenditures allows us to examine the relative magnitudes of the investment and consumption components of women’s spending on beauty-enhancing goods and services. We find that beauty raises women’s earnings (and to a lesser extent, men’s) adjusted for a wide range of controls. Additional spending on clothing and cosmetics has a generally positive but decreasing marginal impact on a woman’s perceived beauty.

Then Professor Hamermesh moved a continent westward, and gazed into the higher branches of the economic forest.

“Business Success and Businesses’ Beauty Capital,” Gerard A. Pfann, Jeff E. Biddle, Daniel S. Hamermesh, and Ciska M. Bosman, *Economics Letters*, April 2000. Professor Hamermesh, together with colleagues at the University of Maastricht, in Nice, France, and at his own university, report that:

Using a sample of Dutch advertising firms, we find that those with better-looking executives have higher revenues. Impacts on revenue far exceed the likely effects of beauty on the executives’ earnings. This suggests that beauty creates firm-specific investments, with the returns shared by the firm and the executive.

Then, for Professor Hamermesh, it was back to academia.

“Beauty in the Classroom: Professors’ Pulchritude and Putative Pedagogical Productivity,” Daniel S. Hamermesh and Amy M. Parker, *NBER Working Paper* No. w9853, July 2003. The authors discovered that:

Instructors who are viewed as better looking receive higher instructional ratings, with the impact of a move from the 10th to the 90th percentile of beauty being substantial. This impact exists within university departments and even within particular courses, and is larger for male than for female instructors. Disentangling whether this outcome represents productivity or discrimination is, as with the issue generally, probably impossible.

I especially recommend you look up Table 2, which presents statistics describing the ratings of the professors’ Beauty.

Beauty and Discounting

Even more recently, Margo Wilson and Martin Daly turned up evidence that convinces them that beautiful women can affect men’s financial acumen. They demonstrated, so they say, that women are more powerful than cars.

“Do Pretty Women Inspire Men to Discount the Future?” Margo Wilson and Martin Daly, *Biology Letters*, December 12, 2003. (Thanks to Mark Litman for bringing this to our attention.) The authors, who are at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, explain that:

Organisms “discount the future” when they value imminent goods over future goods. ... In two experiments, discounting was assessed on the basis of choices between a smaller sum of money tomorrow and a larger sum at a later date, both before and after subjects rated the “appeal” of 12 photographs. In experiment 1, men and women saw either attractive or unattractive opposite-sex faces; in experiment 2, participants saw more or less appealing cars. As predicted, discounting increased significantly in men who viewed attractive women, but not in men who viewed unattractive women or women who viewed men; viewing cars produced a different pattern of results.

Do pretty women inspire men to discount the future?

Margo Wilson* and Martin Daly

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Organisms ‘discount the future’ when they value imminent goods over future goods. Optimal discounting varies: selection should favour allocations of effort that effectively discount the future relatively steeply in response to cues promising relatively good

The Enduring Value of Beauty

Are these studies the final word on the value of Beauty? Of course not. A tremendous amount of research is yet to be done, and perhaps some of what has been done beckons to be undone. That’s how some people see it, though others are blind to Beauty’s charms. The beauty of the value of Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

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