

Acknowledging appearance reduces bias when beauties apply for masculine jobs

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Past research shows physical beauty can be detrimental to women applying for masculine jobs. But belles can put the brakes on discrimination by acknowledging their looks during an interview, according to a new study led by the University of Colorado Boulder.

The paper, published in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, is the first to provide a method for curtailing such prejudice against [attractive women](#).

In the study, when an attractive woman applied for a job typically filled by men—a construction job—and said, "I know I don't look like your typical applicant," or "I know there aren't a lot of women in this industry," and pointed out successes on her resume, she received higher ratings from reviewers than counterparts who made no mention of their looks.

"Turns out there's merit in the old Pantene ad, 'Don't hate me because I'm beautiful,'" said Stefanie Johnson, lead author of the paper and assistant professor of management and entrepreneurship at CU-Boulder's Leeds School of Business. "If a sufferer of female-beauty stereotyping addresses the issue, the perpetrator leaves behind preconceived ideas and is able to more clearly see her professional qualities."

The acknowledgment method could work for job applicants with other types of potential stigmas like being a wheelchair user, said Johnson.

The study also identified the two main types of [sexism](#) that cause people to mentally disqualify women from masculine [jobs](#). One, dubbed "[benevolent sexism](#)," is paternalistic and causes individuals to see women as incapable and in need of protection from job difficulties and physical challenges or dangers. The other, dubbed "hostile sexism," causes individuals to see women as violators of gender roles, encroaching on job turf that's rightfully male.

For the study, 355 participants were divided into three groups. Each group looked at fictitious applications for a construction job opening.

The first group—male and female undergraduate business students—looked at four candidates, one of whom was either an attractive or unattractive woman. The rest of the applicants were men. All of the applications included a photo, a written interview statement and a resume, which the participants rated for employment suitability.

Participants in the first group received different versions of either the attractive or unattractive woman's application. A third of the women's applications acknowledged their appearance; a third acknowledged their sex; and a third acknowledged neither. The raters who received the application of the attractive woman who had acknowledged her appearance or sex gave higher marks than those who received the application of the attractive woman who hadn't acknowledged either.

Then a second group of male and female undergraduate business students participated in a similar review process. However, there was only one application from an attractive woman who acknowledged both her appearance and her sex in her interview statement.

This second part of the study sought to uncover the reasons why acknowledgment improves the ratings of attractive women. The participants were asked to rate how masculine and how spiteful they

thought the attractive applicant was, as well as how suitable she was for the job.

This revealed two underlying types of sexism at play in the interview: hostile sexism in which attractive women were seen as violating their gender role when applying for masculine jobs, creating the impression that they're cold and belligerent; and benevolent sexism, in which they're seen as too feminine to do the job because of their beauty.

Acknowledging the female-beauty stigma mitigates both, said Johnson.

"The participants' perceptions of how bitchy she was decreased and their perceptions of how masculine she was increased because of the acknowledgment she'd given in the interview statement," said Johnson.

"Recognizing the fact that her appearance was atypical reduced the violation of her gender role and conveyed that she was capable of performing the job duties."

The third group—all male construction workers—completed a survey that gauged whether they were sexist and which type of sexism they represented. The participants reviewed a similar application package as the other groups, except that the [attractive woman](#) and her interview were presented in a video rather than in a photo and written statement.

This part of the study aimed to show how acknowledgment affected the ratings of the two different types of sexists, according to Johnson. It influenced both.

"If you score higher on hostile sexism and the beautiful female applicant acknowledges her appearance and sex, you rate her less negatively—you still might hate her for being there, but a little less. If you're a benevolent sexist and she acknowledges, you rate her more positively," said Johnson.

Examples of other jobs that could be considered masculine are engineer, accountant and prison guard, said Johnson.

Co-authors of the paper are Traci Sitzmann, assistant professor of management at the University of Colorado Denver, and Anh Thuy Nguyen, graduate student at the Illinois Institute of Technology.

Another issue they explored during the study was unattractive women who acknowledge their looks when applying for masculine jobs, said Johnson. There was no benefit to the acknowledgment, they found.

"In fact, it made the situation worse for unattractive women when they acknowledged their looks," said Johnson. "They received lower ratings."

More information: *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, authors.elsevier.com/sd/article/S0749597814000715

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