

Beauty and the beast: Why both can win at social selling

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Researchers from Lingnan University of Hong Kong published a new paper in the *Journal of Marketing* that examines the role that facial attractiveness has in social selling.

The study forthcoming in the *Journal of Marketing* is titled "The Faces of Success: Beauty and Ugliness Premiums in Online Platforms" and is authored by Ling Peng, Geng Cui, Yuho Chung, and Wanyi Zheng.

Across C2C e-commerce platforms like eBay and Etsy, millions of social sellers pitch products of every imaginable category. Because trust is a key driver of online transactions between strangers, the first impression from the profile pictures of sellers, and specifically how attractive they are, makes a real difference. Unlike super models or celebrity endorsers, online sellers are mostly [ordinary people](#) who may be attractive, plain looking, or unattractive. How the facial attractiveness of these profile pictures affects sales is the question of a new study in the *Journal of Marketing*. Some of the findings are surprising.

The research team first used the homestay platform Airbnb as a data pool. For more than 17,000 Airbnb listings, the facial attractiveness of over 10,000 hosts was rated using their profile pictures. The annual occupancy rates of these listings were also noted. Hosts with [attractive faces](#) had a 6% higher annual occupancy rate than those with plain-looking faces (62% vs. 56%). Hosts with perfect faces had an occupancy rate as high as 22% more than those with plain-looking faces. So, everything being equal, good looks sell more. In other words, there is a

"beauty premium."

As much as we would like to believe that we, as consumers, make rational decisions and are not affected by superficial factors, studies have repeatedly shown the opposite. We tend to make judgments of a person's sociability, competence, and credibility based on facial attractiveness. Specifically, people with attractive faces are perceived to have more of these positive qualities. Evolutionary psychology helps explain this beauty premium: attractive faces signal good genes and health for reproduction.

What about hosts on the other end of the spectrum—those with [unattractive faces](#)? While previous studies mostly compare attractive people with less attractive ones (i.e., the plain-looking and unattractive groups lumped together), this study separates these groups and find an "ugliness premium." Unattractive Airbnb hosts had a 4% higher annual occupancy rate on average compared with plain-looking hosts and the most unattractive hosts had as much as a 16% higher occupancy rate.

This second finding might appear counterintuitive. However, evolutionary theory can provide an answer here, too. It is widely believed that people engage in compensatory adaptation to leverage their advantages or compensate for their disadvantages. As such, unattractive people may compensate for their disadvantaged appearance by working harder to achieve similar results, leading to a perception of greater competence.

All in all, the extremely attractive and unattractive hosts have the most success. Results from studying another e-commerce site, 5miles, confirm the same pattern: Both attractive and unattractive sellers are likely to make a sale than their plain-looking counterparts. So, although a profile picture only occupies a small portion of a seller's product listing, loading a profile picture is not a task to be taken lightly. It has a non-negligible

effect on purchases because consumers form instant impressions of people based on face perception.

Subsequent experiments indicate that we pay longer attention to both attractive and unattractive faces than plain-looking sellers. The amygdala, an almond-shaped region of our subcortical brain, directs our attention to unusual things, attractive or not. Moreover, attractive sellers are considered more sociable and competent than plain-looking people, especially when selling items relevant to appearance such as cosmetics and skin care products, whereas unattractive sellers are thought of only as more competent, especially when pitching technical products that require expertise, like electronics.

Interestingly, the beauty and ugliness premiums we observed were gendered. While the beauty premium is typically stronger for the opposite sex than for the same gender, we find this does not apply to women selling online—attractive female sellers do not have an edge over less attractive women in appealing to male buyers. Meanwhile, the ugliness premium is only true for male sellers facing female buyers, who may consider unattractive men more competent than the average Joe, perhaps perpetuating the stereotype of the tech-savvy nerd.

These novel findings give social sellers and e-marketers insight about how to leverage [seller](#) appearances in online selling. Peng explains that "While attractive sellers enjoy an advantage, especially for appearance-enhancing products, people without perfect facial symmetry and proportions should not shy away from displaying their true colors. Emphasizing expertise in technical products can boost their credibility and performance."

If you, like many others, have a plain look, you can do a few things to avoid the plainness penalty and boost your sales. In addition to a good quality photograph (i.e., in brightness and pixels), wearing make-up or a

smile, or taking a photo from your best angle may help to enhance your attractiveness and avoid being too plain-looking to get attention or to make a sale.

More information: Ling Peng et al, The Faces of Success: Beauty and Ugliness Premiums in e-Commerce Platforms, *Journal of Marketing* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0022242920914861](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022242920914861)

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