

The relative importance of facial attractiveness and gender in Hong Kong selection decisions

Randy K. Chiu and Richard D. Babcock

Abstract This field experiment found that Hong Kong human resources management specialists were influenced by the attractiveness bias in evaluating short-listed candidates for an entry-level trainee position. Zero order, stepwise and hierarchical regressions showed that perceived attractiveness of the candidates was more related to their work experience and work-related skills than to grade-point average and public examination results. Women candidates were generally preferred over male candidates. Further research is suggested to determine if the influence of attractiveness extends over a wider range of jobs and to measure more precisely the influence of attractiveness in different cultures and for men and women.

Keywords Physical attractiveness; facial attractiveness; gender; employment decisions

Introduction

The attractiveness bias is a widely accepted phenomenon that is said to impact on all interpersonal relationships (Berscheid and Walster, 1972; Feingold, 1992). As the employment selection process involves interpersonal relationships, the attractiveness bias may be activated as better-looking candidates are preferred over equally qualified but less attractive people in hiring decisions (Marlowe *et al.*, 1996). People may carry over the attractiveness biases from interpersonal judgements made in everyday behaviour to the selection of job candidates. The attractiveness bias also has predictive value as there is a high degree of intra-cultural agreement on what constitutes attractiveness in a given culture (Daibo *et al.*, 1997; Umberson and Hughes, 1987; Wheeler and Kim, 1997). The findings of these studies have been based on using surrogate samples and Western subjects. In this study, we extend the research on the attractiveness bias by looking at how human resources management (HRM) specialists (actual decision makers) evaluate applications in a non-Western setting (i.e. among Hong Kong Chinese in Hong Kong). We also examine attractiveness as the construct relates to other selection criteria and as it applies to males and females in a Chinese context.

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Literature review

In this section, we review the literature on physical attractiveness in the overall area of interpersonal relationships and in the employee-selection process. Physical attractiveness has been defined as the degree to which one's physical and facial image elicits favourable reactions from others (Morrow, 1990). Generally speaking, physical attractiveness is rated quantitatively from low (unattractive) to high (very attractive). It is important to note that some have also restricted their definition of attractiveness to facial attractiveness (see Cann *et al.*, 1981; Chung and Leung, 1988; Heilman and Stopeck, 1985). Facial attractiveness is an interesting but abstract construct since different people have contrasting views about what constitutes attractiveness. Physical attractiveness is essentially not a quantitative trait. If a substantial number of judges rate a stimulus person as high or low in physical attractiveness, then, for research purposes this stimulus person is interpreted as representative of that level of physical attractiveness. This measurement process is conducted through either a forced distribution (sort photos in a rank order) or a free category rating (rate photos along a continuum) (Patzer, 1985: 15–7). Of all physical qualities of a person, the impact of attractiveness, whether referenced via an overall rating or specifically, a person's face, is the most frequently researched aspect of appearance. Generally, frontal face is used for the judgements of attractiveness or unattractiveness made by raters (Ilkka, 1995: 12); it cannot be measured by a research instrument. In an evaluation of a person's overall attractiveness, facial attractiveness is considered of primary importance (Dickey-Bryant *et al.*, 1986). The consistent use of facial appearance in evaluating physical attractiveness is justified because the face has unique and powerful properties, which appear to make it omnipotent and omnipresent (Ilkka, 1995; Patzer, 1985). The face is interesting, enduring, and informative and used by people to make a wide-ranging of judgements about a person. In fact, Patzer (1985) suggested that facial features coincide with some personality traits, and the face is an accurate indicator of specific personal attributes (Liggett, 1974). Attractive individuals are perceived to be more sociable, successful, happier than people who are less good looking. Today, billions of dollars are spent on cosmetics applications and reconstructive surgery because people 'judge a book by its cover' (Patzer, 1985: 12). Following this body of research, we used the consensus of judges of facial attractiveness to define physical attractiveness.

Considerable research activity has been directed towards investigating the effect of the attractiveness bias in employment-related situations. The peak research period started in the 1970s and continued through the 1980s. Research activity has continued in the general area of physical attractiveness in the 1990s. A CD Rom search found that nearly 400 articles on physical appearance were published in 1990–9. The consensus of these studies is that the attractiveness bias influences choices in making interpersonal judgements. Attractive faces appear to be more easily recognized than unattractive faces (Sarno and Alley, 1997). In general, highly attractive persons have been perceived as possessing positive traits whereas those low in attractiveness have been viewed less favourably (Feingold, 1992). This generalization is known as the 'What is beautiful is good stereotype' (Dion *et al.*, 1972). Attractive people have more prestigious jobs, make more money, describe themselves as happier and healthier, are regarded as having better social skills and being more co-operative (Mehrabian and Blum, 1997; Mulford *et al.*, 1998; Shackelford and Larsen, 1999; Umberson and Hughes, 1987). They are poised, interesting, sociable, independent, exciting, sexually warm and perceived to be desirable dating partners (Chapdelaine *et al.*, 1999; Mehrabian and Blum, 1997;

Townsend and Wasserman, 1997; Wiederman and Hurst, 1998). Moreover, both attractive men and women were found to be more persuasive than unattractive ones (Chaiken, 1979) and were offered more in the bargaining situation (Solnick and Schweitzer, 1999). Attractive individuals were generally found to have slightly higher self-esteem (Kwon, 1997) and tended to be less prone to psychological disorders, although two other studies found that physical attractiveness had little association with self-esteem (Feingold, 1988; Nell and Ashton, 1996).

A related issue strikes is the strength of the attractiveness bias construct. The studies on facial/physical attractiveness suggest that there is a strong attractiveness bias in all areas of human judgement. In a meta-analytical review of these studies, Eagly *et al.* (1991) conclude that the attractiveness stereotype is not as strong or general as suggested by the often-used summary phrase 'What is beautiful is good'. The strength of the attractiveness bias also varies as a function of other attributes in these studies, including the presence of individuating information.

Attractiveness and employment selection

Studies assessing the impact of physical appearance on employment and personnel matters in an enterprise environment are less clear-cut and even contradictory or inconclusive. Physical appearance has been found to be a beneficial characteristic in both the employment process and in subsequent selection, placement and promotion decisions. Attractiveness affects first impressions in job interviews (Cash and Janda, 1984; Ilkka, 1995), and these authors speculate that even experienced managers may not be able to avoid the attractiveness bias by favouring attractive over less attractive candidates. This bias may be carried out by what is called the 'tiebreaker effect' (Ilkka, 1995). This predicts that, when the qualifications of applicants are similar, the applicants' appearance becomes the determining factor in hiring and promotion decisions. Attractive applicants are perceived to be more qualified than unattractive applicants (Cash *et al.*, 1977; Drogosz and Levy, 1996; Jackson *et al.*, 1995; Marlowe *et al.*, 1996), are largely preferred when attractiveness is relevant to the job and are recommended for higher salaries (Dipboye *et al.*, 1977; Jackson, 1983). Other studies found that attractiveness was not positively related to the employment selection (Cash *et al.*, 1977; Gilmore *et al.*, 1986; Heilman and Saruwatari, 1979). The preponderance of evidence from these studies indicates that there is a positive relationship between attractiveness and employment decisions. The only study we found that assessed the importance of attractiveness in the Chinese work setting failed to uncover a clear relationship between attractiveness and promotion (Chung and Leung, 1988). In situations where the abilities of candidates were high, the attractiveness of those candidates had little effect on the timing of their promotions. However, attractive candidates were slightly more likely to be quickly promoted to a level beyond that warranted by their abilities.

The surrogate issue Researchers have used convenience samples and captive populations (either university students or enterprise employees and managers attending training courses or management meetings) as research subjects. The use of surrogates rather than actual decision makers as research subjects raises the issue of whether their judgements can accurately assess the impact of attractiveness bias on employee-selection decisions. In reviewing studies on simple decision making, there are considerable similarities between decision making and the apparent underlying information-processing behaviour of student surrogates and business practitioners. But, in making

complex decisions, experienced accountants organized a wide range of information in the decision-making process whereas student surrogates followed a simple, undirected sequential information search (Abdolmohammadi and Wright, 1987; Ashton and Kramer, 1980). In a comprehensive review article, Choo (1989) listed and described definitive differences between experts and novices (meaning new employees or student surrogates) in the following areas: information-acquisition behaviour, information-integration behaviour and decision performance. Screening candidates where multiple employment criteria are involved fits, we would argue, in the category of complex decisions. All the variables specified in the selection must be processed and organized together to sort the best candidates. In doing so experienced HRM specialists may possibly give equal or proper weight to all the selection criteria and thereby avoid the attractiveness bias found by prior researchers using surrogates. Even though some practising managers may have some prior exposure in screening candidates, these individuals on the whole do not necessarily have the experience base to turn the screening decision into a complex rather than a simple decision. The question is thus left open as to whether the prior studies using surrogates provide responses that accurately reflect how professional HR managers actually make decisions in the hiring process. Professional HR managers may well make decisions that differ from those of surrogates who do not have either the responsibility for or the experience in making employment decisions.

The cultural difference issue Another issue is whether the overall findings of the studies on the relationship between facial/physical appearance and employment-related outcomes could be generalized across cultures. The prior studies on attractiveness bias were by and large based on data collected in the United States. However, it has been established that there are no universally accepted standards for an attractive face and different ethnic groups have different standards of beauty (Daibo *et al.*, 1997). Thus, without collaborative studies in non-Western cultures, the question is left open as to whether the appearance bias in employment selection processes is a cultural universal or varies in importance across cultures. As researchers have found that the United States (a Western culture) and Hong Kong (a Chinese culture) exhibit large cultural differences in general (Brislin, 2000; Chiu and Kosinski, 1999; Francesco and Gold, 1998), it follows that physical/facial attractiveness may be judged differently in a Chinese culture and the empirical data gathered in the United States may not accurately represent the attractiveness criteria of Hong Kong Chinese (Daibo *et al.*, 1997). In fact, some scholars suggest that the attractiveness bias may be less pronounced in Oriental societies (Dong *et al.*, 1996; Wheeler and Kim, 1997).

There are no universally accepted standards that describe facial attractiveness. In describing beauty, cultures differ in regard to which physical features, personality traits and moral virtues are regarded as desirable in people (Chen *et al.*, 1997; Daibo, 1993). Researchers have recently put forth arguments that assert that the attractiveness bias may be mitigated in Chinese culture (Dong *et al.*, 1996). Physical attractiveness has been shown to be less important (Dion *et al.*, 1990) and attractiveness is rated less highly as a desirable characteristic in any form of relationship in Chinese as compared to Western societies (Goodwin and Tang, 1996). A possible explanation for this difference could be attributed to the fact that, in the Chinese culture, human relations are based on the Confucian value of the internal goodness (*Jen*) of a person and not on the external beauty of that individual. A person's physical appearance is not of crucial importance when compared to the conscientiousness and good-naturedness of that individual's personality (Brislin, 2000; Chen *et al.*, 1997; Chiu *et al.*, 1998).

Attractiveness and employment selection criteria

Shum (1995) used a survey questionnaire to ascertain the criteria used by Hong Kong business firms to select university graduates as management trainees. The criteria among which the respondents could choose were the reputation of their university, the nature of the study programme(s), prior work experience, work-related skills, grade-point average (GPA) and public examination(s) results. Candidates' attractiveness was not included as a choice. According to the findings of this study, Hong Kong companies, selecting university graduates as management trainees, placed more emphases on the reputation of the school, prior work experience and relevant work-related skills. The remaining factors such as university major, GPA and examination results were ranked as less important. The first hypothesis is directed towards assessing the impact of the attractiveness bias on Hong Kong HRM decision makers and ascertaining whether the attractiveness bias has an obvious predictive function in the screening of employment candidates over other criteria that were mentioned in Shum's study (1995). That is, does perceived attractiveness have more predictive power than grade-point averages (GPA), public examination results (EXM), work-related skills (SKI) and work experience (EXP)?

Hypothesis 1: Among all selection criteria, facial attractiveness (APP) has the largest impact on the likelihood of getting an interview as measured by final short-listing outcome scores (OUT).

Attractiveness has been found to be positively related to academic ability and educational attainment (Umberson and Hughes, 1987). Furthermore, Dipboye *et al.* (1987) found that both academic standing and candidates' attractiveness had significant effects on employment decisions, but that, comparatively speaking, scholastic achievement carried more weight than physical attractiveness. Attractiveness also has been found to be positively related to work-related skills and work experience. Physical appearance may exert a powerful halo effect that contributes to the 'What is beautiful is good' bias (Myers, 1999). Individuals with an attractive appearance are considered to have better social, interpersonal and work-related skills because they tend to be more socially warm, intelligent, in control and have good and relevant experiences (Brehm and Kassin, 1993; Morrow, 1990; Myers, 1999).

The second hypothesis was to confirm whether our respondents would have been affected by the 'What is beauty is good' bias, as supported by previous studies done in the US. Based on the argument of the halo effect, the authors assumed that the HRM specialists would perceive attractive applicants as having higher grade-point averages (GPA), higher examination scores (EXM), better work-related skills (SKI) and relevant work experience (EXP). The assumptions were tested with the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: There is a positive significant correlational relationship between attractiveness (APP) and other selection criteria (GPA, EXM, SKI and EXP).

Attractiveness and gender

In this section we review studies relating appearance and gender. Dipboye *et al.* (1977) found that male applicants were preferred over female applicants, attractive women were regarded as more feminine than unattractive women and attractive men were regarded as more masculine than unattractive men. However, such generalizations are under criticism from other researchers as factors such as the nature of the job (male-

oriented, female-oriented or neutral job), the sex-role characteristics of the job (masculine, feminine or androgynous) and the raters themselves were not considered (see Cash *et al.*, 1977; Heilman and Saruwatari, 1979). Other studies have suggested that attractiveness might not always be advantageous and could in fact have negative effects as evidence in the 'Beauty is beast' effect (Heilman and Saruwatari, 1979). For instance, cases have been cited in which recruiters employed unattractive candidates rather than attractive candidates. In particular, facially attractive women were not viewed as positively as unattractive women when both were under consideration for masculine-stereotyped jobs (Cash *et al.*, 1977). Therefore, the effects of facial attractiveness may well be mediated by the perceived fit between assumed attributes and presumed job requirements. However, Marlowe *et al.* (1996) found a positive relationship between gender and attractiveness. These authors investigated the relationship between the attractiveness bias and suitability for hire and probable organizational progression within a financial institution. One hundred and twelve managers evaluated four equivalent resumé-date sheets, to which different candidate photographs were attached. The photographs were varied using a 2×2 (gender \times attractiveness) design wherein each photograph depicted a woman or a man who was either highly attractive or slightly below average in attractiveness. For both ratings and rankings of candidates, clear evidence of attractiveness and gender biases were present. The extent of the bias was smaller for the experienced managers, although less attractive female applicants were routinely at a disadvantage regardless of managerial experience. Other recent studies have shown that attractive applicants applying for managerial positions were preferred over the unattractive applicants and that attractive men were preferred over attractive women as well (Cash and Kilcullen, 1985; Drogosz and Levy, 1996; Jackson *et al.*, 1995).

In terms of the effect of gender on the selection process, the literature (Cash and Kilcullen, 1985; Dipboye *et al.*, 1977; Drogosz and Levy, 1996; Jackson *et al.*, 1995) suggested that, in the course of selecting job applicants, male candidates were preferred over female candidates, in general. The assumption that male applicants may have an advantage over female applicants was tested with the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Male applicants will be generally but not universally preferred over female applicants in the employment screening process.

Method

This field experiment study was designed to closely resemble a distinct step in the typical employment recruitment process: the evaluation of short-listed candidates' application packages by HRM specialists. The main purpose of this study was to examine how job applicants were selected based on the effects of personal appearance and individual attributes. Thus, non-individual factors, such as type of degree earned, nature of the academic programme and university affiliation, were held constant at the design stage. Therefore, this study was designed to measure statistically the relationships between the dependent variable, the final selection outcome scores (OUT) and the independent variables, appearance (APP), grade-point average (GPA), public examination results (EXM), previous work experience (EXP) and work-related skills (SKI) of the applicants.

Hong Kong HRM specialists evaluated six application packages and shortlisted one candidate for an interview. These respondents were a balanced group of experienced professionals who were also members of a local professional human resource management body. The research materials were sent by mail to all 300 of the active members

Table 1 Profiles of the respondents (*n* = 64)

Respondents (<i>n</i> = 64)	Gender	Male	54.6%
		Female	45.4%
	Nationality/culture	Hong Kong Chinese	100%
	Age	30–35 years old	29.8%
		35–40 years old	42.1%
		40–45 years old	20.3%
		45–50 years old	7.8%
	Experience	Less than 5 years	6.2%
		5–10 years	48.4%
		11–15 years	29.7%
		More than 15 years	15.7%
	Rank	Supervisory/specialist	65.6%
		Managerial	34.4%

who represented different age groups, different experience levels and both males and females (see Table 1). Sixty-four usable responses were received, a response rate of 21.3 per cent. This response rate appears satisfactory since Harzing (1997) found that Hong Kong had the lowest response rate (7.1 per cent) among twenty-two countries in a recent study of response rates in international mail surveys.

The HRM specialists were informed that the job to be filled was a management trainee position in the personnel/HRM department. A job description was supplied. Application packages for six job applicants were prepared. Each of the six application packages contained different information for the following variables: grade-point average, public examination results, previous work experience and work-related skills. Photographs (APP) of six individuals (three males and three females) were randomly assigned and rotated to the six application packages. To evaluate the candidates, the HRM specialists 1) rated the applicants on a 5-point Likert scale for each of the above criteria and 2) indicated the likelihood (1 to 5) of inviting the applicants for selection interviews.

The collective judgement of judges determined the relative standard of appearance (high, medium or low) of the job applicants. Judges independently assessed the appearance (APP) of the job applicants by sorting photos of Chinese students into three categories (high, medium or low). The judges who assisted in this process were teaching colleagues of the authors, were selected to participate by the authors based on their respective areas of expertise and participated as a professional courtesy. Two of the judges were professors of management, two were professors of communication and two were professors of psychology. This evaluation process parallels that used by similar studies (see Chung and Leung, 1988; Dickey-Bryant *et al.*, 1986; Dipboye *et al.*, 1977; Marlowe *et al.*, 1996; Townsend and Wasserman, 1997).

The following is a conceptual overview of the process:

- 1 Prepare application packages for six candidates.
- 2 Choose photographs that represented ranges of attractiveness from attractive to unattractive (senior author chose pictures from a college yearbook).
- 3 Select judges to put the photos into three attractiveness categories for males and females.

- 4 Have judges sort pictures into three categories based on their judgements of attractiveness for males and females.
- 5 Choose photographs that have the highest inter-rater agreement.
- 6 Prepare six application packages containing the following: photographs (APP), grade-point average (GPA), public examination results (EXM), previous work experience (EXP) and work-related skills (SKI). All application packages also included the following common information: age, degree earned and academic subjects. The photographs were rotated among the six application packages. The application packages were accompanied by a cover letter requesting co-operation if the HRM specialist was engaged in the hiring and application screening process and a set of instructions.
- 7 Have the Hong Kong HRM specialists evaluate the applicants and return their responses to us.

As for further confirmation, manipulation checks were later conducted and the choices of the participants agreed with those of the judges. Analysis of variance was performed on the rating of respondents' ratings on the appearance of the six candidates. The main effect for attractiveness was significant. For both genders, candidates of high attractiveness were rated as more attractive than those of medium and those of low attractiveness. Thus, the manipulation for facial attractiveness was successful.

We utilized a variety of statistical procedures to analyse the responses of the HRM specialists. Means and standard deviations were computed for all selection criteria. A paired sample *t*-test was used to compare male and female applicants. To find the predictive power of attractiveness we employed zero-order, stepwise and hierarchical regressions.

Results and interpretations

Hypothesis 1 asked whether facial attractiveness, among all selection criteria, had the largest impact on the likelihood of getting an interview as measured by final shortlisting outcome scores (OUT). Zero-order correlation results (Table 2) show that all selection criteria used in the study had positive correlational relationships with the shortlisting outcome preference (OUT). The appearance (APP) of the candidates, their work experience (EXP) and work-related skills (SKI) were moderately highly related to the final shortlisting outcomes ($r = .688, .629$ and $.591$ respectively), while grade-point average (GPA) and public examination results (EXM), though correlated, had weaker correlational relationships with the final shortlisting outcomes ($r = .462$, and $.331$

Table 2 Zero-order correlation matrix of the variables

<i>Variable</i>	<i>APP</i>	<i>EXM</i>	<i>EXP</i>	<i>GPA</i>	<i>SKI</i>	<i>OUT</i>
APP	–	.059	.442***	–.032	.543***	.668***
EXM		–	.314*	.392**	.223	.262*
EXP			–	.195	.401**	.629***
GPA				–	–.095	.071
SKI					–	.561***

Notes

$n = 64$ *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Key: APP (appearance), EXM (public examination results), EXP (work experience), GPA (grade-point average), SKI (work-related skills).

respectively). From the results of the zero-order correlation analysis, remarkably, APP appears to have the largest predictive power as compared to other selection variables. In order to further confirm the hints indicated by the correlational matrix, a stepwise multiple regression analysis was conducted to see whether APP played a leading role in explaining the selection outcome. The SPSS statistical software identified APP as the first variable going to the stepwise regression with a meaningful and significant beta as indicated by the zero-order correlation. Again, using final attractiveness shortlisting outcome (OUT) as the dependent variable, each of the selection criteria, including appearance, was regressed into a hierarchical regression equation to see which variable explained most of the variance of the dependent variable and how other variables played their roles. According to the results, besides the attractiveness variable, the HRM specialists apparently discriminated among the non-appearance variables and trusted work experience (EXP) and work-related skills (SKI) more than examination results (EXM) and grades (GPA). In the model, the criteria variables explained 58.3 per cent of the variance in the final shortlisting outcome (Table 3). According to the model, the predictive power of all non-appearance variables dropped remarkably. The significant drop of the beta of EXP as well as SKI may be due to the fact that there was a moderate intercorrelational relationship between appearance (APP) and work experience as well as work-related skills. This relationship suggests that, in the process of evaluating the application packages, the shortlisting decisions are related to the subjective appearance preference of the individual HRM specialist and the discriminate function of other selection criteria used in the process is overshadowed by the respondents' perception of the applicants' appearance. Thus, Hypothesis 1, the argument that the applicant's level of attractiveness has the strongest positive correlation with the likelihood of getting an interview, gained support. This indicates that the respondents' decisions on the final shortlisting are closely related to their ratings of the facial attractiveness of the candidates.

Hypothesis 2 asked whether there were positive significant correlational relationships between attractiveness (APP) and other selection criteria (grade-point average (GPA), public examination results (EXM), work-related skills (SKI) and work experience (EXP)). Table 2 shows that only prior work experience (EXP) and work-related skills (SKI) has a positive moderate correlation with appearance (APP) (.442, and .543 respectively). This result suggests that the HRM specialists tend to think that those applicants who are facially attractive may also have desirable work experiences and are

Table 3 *Results of hierarchically regressing shortlisting outcome on the predictors*

<i>Steps</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>
APP	.668***	.601***	.557***	.549***	.547***
EXP		.320**	.223*	.199*	.156
SKI			.145	.144	.143
EXM				.114	.085
GPA					.044
ΔR^2	.446	.104	.021	.011	.001
R^2	.446	.550	.571	.582	.583
ΔF -Value	41.00**	20.92**	11.08*	7.83	.56

Notes

n = 64, *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Key: APP (appearance), EXM (public examination results), EXP (work experience), GPA (grade-point average), SKI (work-related skills).

Table 4 Mean scores of the five selection criteria ($n = 64$)

Candidate	TOT	APP	EXM	EXP	GPA	SKI
Male						
High	17.25	3.77	3.20	3.17	3.55	3.56
Medium	16.27	2.86	3.19	2.94	3.70	3.58
Low	15.97	2.81	3.33	3.02	3.41	3.41
Female						
High	17.66	3.95	3.41	3.17	3.59	3.53
Medium	17.02	3.38	3.48	3.05	3.44	3.67
Low	14.94	2.98	2.81	2.42	3.47	3.25

Notes

Key: APP (appearance), EXM (public examination results), EXP (work experience), GPA (grade-point average), SKI (work-related skills).

Table 5 Paired samples *t*-test result of the final shortlisting outcomes ($n = 64$)

	Overall		High		Medium		Low	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Total	49.6 (0.28)	49.4	17.66 (1.51)	17.25	17.02 (3.10)	16.27	14.94 (-4.24)***	15.97
Outcome	10.20 (3.15)***	9.62	3.81 (1.47)	3.62	3.37 (6.40)***	2.71	3.02 (2.02)	3.37

Notes

() *t*-values *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Key: Total (total scores on five selection criteria); Outcome (final shortlisting outcome scores).

competent in their job skills. Likewise, the hierarchical regression equation also confirmed this observation as mentioned above. However, such perception did not necessarily link with academic achievement as argued in the literature. Thus, Hypothesis 2 is only partly supported.

Hypothesis 3 asked whether male applicants would be generally but not universally preferred over female applicants in the employment screening process. The assumption of Hypothesis 3, that male applicants were generally preferred over female candidates in the process of shortlisting selection, was not supported. The results showed just the opposite. Table 4 shows the mean score received by the six candidates in each area under evaluation, as well as their total scores. In terms of the total scores of all five selection criteria, there was no significant difference between the two genders in their overall scores and in the high attractive category. However, medium attractive females tended to score significantly higher than their male counterparts, while, in the low attractive category, the result was the reverse. Table 5 shows the shortlisting outcome scores (OUT). The mean score of all female applicants was 10.20 and of all male applicants was 9.62. Female applicants received higher shortlisting outcome scores (OUT) despite the fact that the overall total scores were not significantly different between males and females. These findings contradicted the results of other similar studies (Cash and Kilcullen, 1985; Dipboye *et al.*, 1977; Marlowe *et al.*, 1996) that found that male applicants were preferred over female applicants.

Discussion and limitations

Experienced Hong Kong HRM specialists exhibited an attractiveness bias in the screening of applicants as they made short-listing decisions for a management trainee position in a HR department. The perceived attractiveness of applicants had a higher predictive value than other selection criteria. The considerable experience of the HRM specialists apparently did not act as a constraint in neutralizing the attractiveness bias. This study lends credibility to the proposition that there is a universal attractiveness bias that is operational in the screening process of the application packages of job applicants, despite the established fact that definition of attractiveness varies from cultures to cultures (Daibo *et al.*, 1997; Dong *et al.*, 1996).

The Hong Kong HRM specialists also took the other variables into consideration, as indicated by the intercorrelations between appearance and these variables. They attributed higher importance to work experience and work-related skill than to grade-point average and public examination results. Different selection patterns were disclosed for male and female applicants and, surprisingly, female applicants were generally preferred over male applicants. Our results suggest that physical appearance was the definitive predictive variable and it was not used merely as a tie-breaker.

However, the findings of the present study can possibly be reconciled with the proposition that the attractiveness bias is mitigated in culturally specific situations (Daibo *et al.*, 1997; Dong *et al.*, 1996; Kowner, 1996). The HRM specialists judged facial attractiveness on the basis of distinguishing among photographs – they did not have the opportunity of viewing attractiveness in the context of personal contact with the applicants. The theoretical arguments and the one study assessing the importance of attractiveness in Chinese society assumed the existence of face-to-face contact between the individuals involved. In Chinese society the attractiveness bias may be (a) operational in the absence of interpersonal contact and (b) mitigated once human contact and relationships are established.

Hatfield and Sprecher (1986), Umberson and Hughes (1987) and Daibo *et al.* (1997) argued that there is agreement within a cultural group on the definition of facial attractiveness. Results from the present study lend support to that argument. The fact that the primary author, who first chose the photographs of the students, the judges and the HRM specialists were all Hong Kong Chinese, all agreed on the facial attractiveness of the individuals photographed represents consensus within a cultural group. It is not certain whether this agreement would hold outside that cultural group (Dong *et al.*, 1996). For example, the second author, an American, did not place the pictures in the same categories of attractiveness as did the Chinese participants (the primary author, the judges and the respondents). Consequently, the present study supports prior research asserting that judgements of appearance are consistent within cultural groups, but not necessarily across cultures (Daibo, 1993). In fact, it is almost impossible to appreciate what is perceived to be facial attractiveness across cultures as there are differences in perception, especially among different cultures (Brislin, 2000).

An important practical implication of the present study is that physical appearance may impact on the selection process differently depending on how applicants are initially screened and later interviewed. Because of the attractiveness bias less attractive candidates (based on an upper body photograph emphasizing the face) may be screened out as HRM specialists review the application packages. If an applicant, especially a less attractive candidate, can by-pass the screening process by making personal contact with the HRM specialist, then a different set of evaluation dynamics may be evoked. In addition, a less attractive candidate does not need to include a photograph in the

application package, as suggested by the newly passed legislation that protects personal data privacy and equal opportunity.

Our study has limitations in three areas. First, we created a field experiment where we directly surveyed HRM specialists but this situation still does not represent the exact reality of real-life employment situations. In our experimental design, the HRM specialists were reacting to an artificial situation in which they were not responsible for the results and consequences of their decisions. Consequently, our study represented an intermediate step between the use of surrogate subjects and the examination of actual employment decisions by HRM specialists. In addition, our study looked at only one step in the employment screening process. The original screening of applications was not included in our experimental design as we asked the HRM specialists to evaluate and rate a short list of six candidates without previously screening the total number of applications received.

Second, our experiment studied only the screening process for entry-level positions and for a particular role (HR trainee) where no selection criteria stand out over the other factors. All of the selection criteria could be considered to be equally important in the assessment of candidates for this position. This experimental condition does not fit many employment screening situations where HRM specialists can examine variables in differently weighted categories.

Third, the method we used in the selection of judges did not draw a random sample from the general population but rather used a convenience sample. However, we have confidence in the standard of beauty as our procedure in selecting judges replicated established research practice and was confirmed by statistical procedures.

Against the background of the findings and limitations of our study, we suggest that further research be conducted to investigate the attractiveness bias in various employment situations and under circumstances that resemble as closely as possible the hiring process of the HRM specialist. These studies could clarify whether the attractiveness bias is operational in different cultures, for various jobs and employment situations, and for men and women.

In the present study, HRM specialists exhibited an attractiveness bias in rating and evaluating short-listed candidates where the experimental conditions created selection criteria that were equivalent. The selection process for other jobs and in an actual employment setting may resemble a more complex decision-making process where the attractiveness bias is negated. Conversely the attractiveness bias that exists in the interpersonal decision-making process may be powerful enough, at least in the form of tie-breaking, to overcome the experience of professional human resources managers. In sum, we recommend that a variety of studies be conducted to clarify the issues revolving around attractiveness and employment decisions.

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