RateMyProfessor.com: The Impact of Beauty in the Classroom

In recent times, a numerous amount of economic research has been concentrated around the subject of beauty as it relates with the labor market. Literature on the topic of good looks is also fairly popular, and there is much research that has recognized that the level of attractiveness has its impact on earnings, job performances, perceived working abilities and qualities. In general, these findings seem to indicate that more physically attractive individuals are given certain advantages in these areas. I guess physical traits like height and weights are somewhat crucial to the business world. But based on theory, one’s skills and experiences should be the main components of income, certainly not physical appearance. However, according to previous researches, we can say that physical appearance could be a major exception. With this idea in mind, Dr. Theyson and I have set out to reveal the philosophy behind this.

More recently, many research studies have looked at the potential impact of beauty on perceived professors’ teaching qualities utilizing data from the website Rate My Professor. This database provides a wealth of information on three aspects of instruction: Helpfulness, Clarity and Easiness, with the first two being averaged to get a measure of “Quality.” In addition to this, there is a question on instructor appearance “just for fun” where students can rate their professors’ appearances as “hot or not.” If the professor is hot, then there is a hot pepper icon beside his/her name. If the professor is not hot, then there is no pepper icon at all. Felton, Mitchell and Stinson (2004) find that there is a positive and significant correlation between “hotness” and professor quality. Lawson and Stephenson (2005) reconfirm this relationship using regression analysis and assert that these findings indicate that professors gain in perceived quality from “hotness.” Furthermore, Sen, Voia and Woolley (2010) find that for some groups “hotness” can result in a “significant earnings premium.” I believe this inflow of new information and knowledge could actually benefit future students’ decision making processes.
through emerging technology; possibly increasing the efficiency level within the university. This could also makes professors more competitive in terms of increasing their teaching qualities in the classroom setting; thus providing the university a more favorable learning environment to choose by college students.

None of these papers, however, attempt to address the issue of causality. While it is possible that “hotness” induces better teaching evaluations from students, it is also possible that students are more likely to view higher quality teachers (and thus teachers they like) as “hot.” Hamermesh and Parker (2005) address a similar topic in looking at teaching evaluations from the University of Texas. Using an objective measure of beauty, they find that there is a positive relationship between beauty and students’ perception of class quality from end of course evaluations with marginal benefits for beauty accruing more to men than to women. However, our primary objective of this research is to address the following question: whether or not teacher quality can affect perceptions of beauty? This is an important issue and failure to address it may lead to an overstatement of the impact of beauty on instructional evaluations as well as labor market outcomes. This research project is also intended to examine the importance of the relationship between perception of beauty or a source of error in the theory, and the reasons why some professors have a pepper icon without correspondingly having an attractive physical appearance.

Needless to say, many studies concerning student evaluations of quality of teaching are subjective. In other words, previous works contain data that is potentially biased primarily due to the reason that online evaluations are unreliable and invalid. Those ratings could be entered by anyone, anywhere at any time. They could also be affected by the characteristics and feelings of raters. Therefore, the ratings could have a halo effect which means that the students who rated the professor either have the tendency to like or hate the class. Thus, these reports are inaccurate and imprecise measurements of education qualities.
In contrast, there are some studies that suggest internet ratings might not be biased Carini et al. (2003), Hardy (2003), and Mchee and Lowell (2003). The student raters who have evaluated could have one or more classes with the professor, or they might have talked with another student who has a similar experience. Even if some ratings are inaccurate measures of professor teaching quality, they could be balanced with the opposite measure, and if there are many ratings, the true representation (average score) will be shown.

My internship was divided into four phrases. The timeline for this project will involve 2-3 weeks of data collection, 2-3 weeks of data cleaning and 1-2 weeks of data analysis. Following this, 2-3 weeks was necessary to clean up any loose ends and compose a paper detailing our findings. In this study, we examined the effects of attractiveness and student evaluations of teaching quality in terms of a more objective manner. The project was fairly straightforward with few potential complications. It involved first collecting publicly available data from the Rate My Professor website as well as publicly available photographs of professors from university websites. It is our intention to focus on a single university other than Sewanee to avoid contamination of the results by student knowledge of professor quality, although we may expand to look at multiple non-Sewanee universities as necessary.

Once the data and photographs have been collected, we have photographs rated by students at Sewanee to determine an objective measure of beauty. This objective measure will be combined with the Rate My Professor data to be analyzed by using statistical techniques including ordinary least squares as well as Tobit and probit analysis. Therefore, we eliminate any variables that might contribute to the factor of hotness such as multi dimensions of personality or professors’ style of teaching. For examples, students might think professors would be hotter if they are more lenient on grading, or if they have a sense of humor.
It is important to note that this research is not perfect in that it is examining the differences created by only one variable independently of many others. It does not take into account other important variables such as many traits of personality, work ethics or other characteristics. The expected products of this work will be a publication and a potential presentation to the Midwestern Economic Conference. I believe this subject is important to the business world because it can help us to develop an awareness of the impact of public perception of physical beauty within the work place.

In terms of career development, I believe this opportunity will help bring me closer to my goal of a career in international business by giving me a better sense of what potential employers are looking for and what makes them pull the trigger on a new hire. Since the business world is continually merging and becoming more entwined, I also believe that there is a great need for people who understand the customs and practices of the different professional workplace cultures. Furthermore, I think this internship will help me to gain some experience, skills, and knowledge that can't be learned from textbooks. I consider this internship was an opportunity to bolster my ability to research diverse topics by organizing data spreadsheets and graphs and to hone other skills necessary for entry into the world of international business. I am truly grateful for this wonderful opportunity from Dr. Theyson and the funding from FITL.