The Impact of Physical Appearance on Employer Interest in Argentina

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Sector(s): Gender, Labor Markets

Location: Argentina

Sample: 2,540 fictitious resumes

Target group: Small and medium enterprises Large enterprises

Outcome of interest: Discrimination Employment

Intervention type: Information Recruitment and hiring

AEA RCT registration number: AEARCTR-0001142

Research Papers: The Labor Market Return to an Attractive Face: Evidence from a Field Experiment

Partner organization(s): Chilean Ministry of Economics, Development and Tourism, Universidad de Buenos Aires

In many countries around the world, there is growing concern that certain groups of people may face job market discrimination based on physical appearance. To test this theory, researchers randomly submitted resumes with photos of people with varying levels of attractiveness to measure the effect on prospective employer interest. They found that, on average, resumes with attractive photos were 36 percent more likely to receive a callback than resumes with unattractive photos.

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In many countries around the world, there is growing concern that certain groups of people may face discrimination when searching for a job based on their physical appearance. This discrimination could unnecessarily exclude certain populations from the labor market, resulting in workers whose skills might not perfectly match the jobs they get. This can hurt both employees' earnings and employers' profits. Moreover, previous research indicates that greater attractiveness is not generally associated with greater productivity, but may affect which candidates are hired. In order to combat this, several countries are currently considering policies that mandate the anonymization of resumes, removing details such as name, age, or gender, as well as accompanying photographs.

While there is a large body of research analyzing how employers offer jobs and adjust wages based on physical appearance, no research has evaluated the specific effect of measurable facial beauty on job application callbacks.

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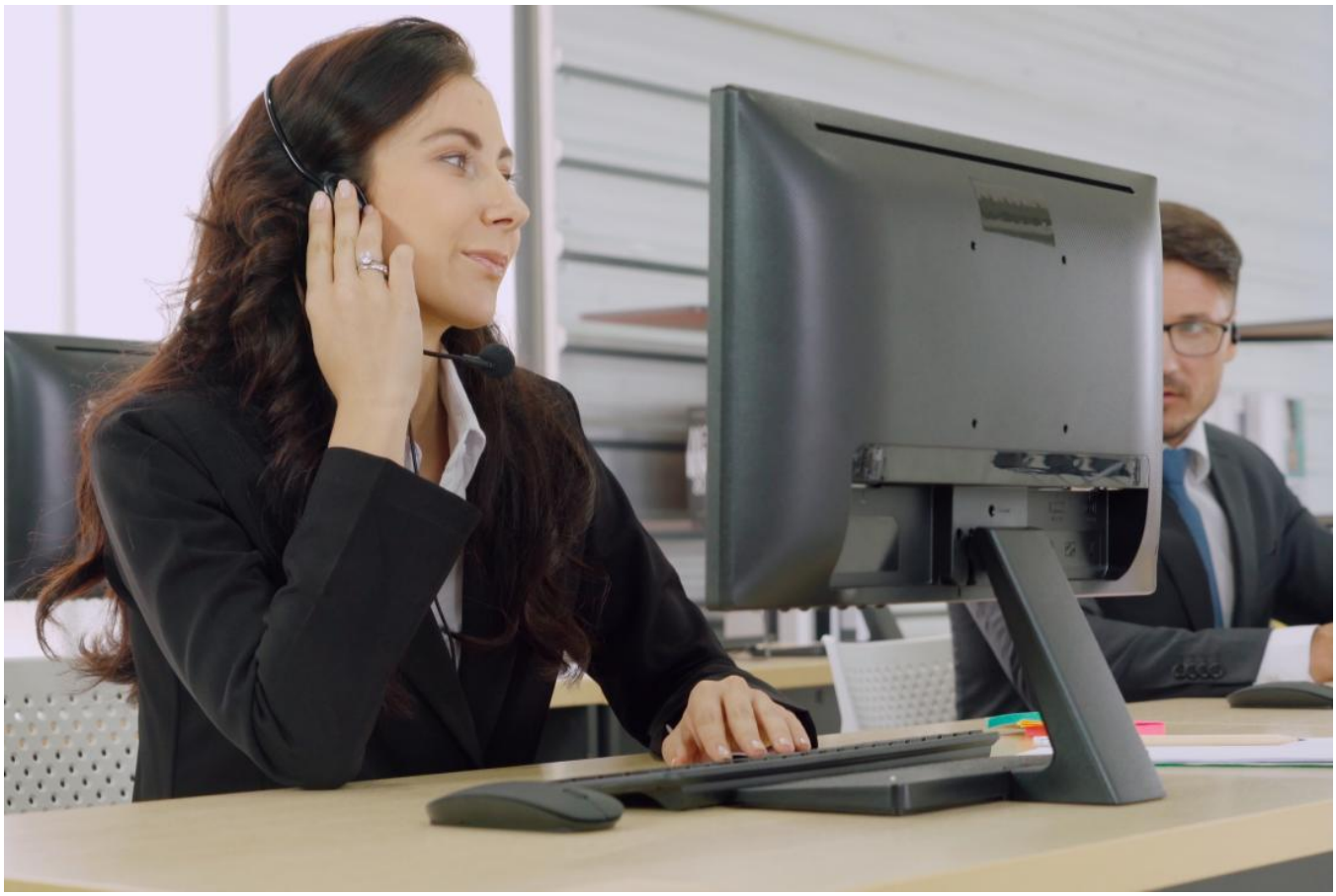
In Argentina, employers are increasingly using job search websites to publicize job openings and collect applications. For this study, researchers used job listings on one of the largest job search website in Argentina. All job listings included in this study were looking for employees in Buenos Aires to perform jobs in one of the following categories: sales, office (administrative support), business (financial operations), office (administrative support), food preparation (service-related), and unskilled work.

Researchers excluded any applications requiring phone calls or in-person appearances.



A woman wearing a headset works at her computer in an office.

Photo credit: Shutterstock.com

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Researchers partnered with a large job search website in Argentina to conduct a randomized evaluation testing the impact of facial attractiveness on job callbacks. To evaluate this, researchers first generated fictitious resumes that either included or excluded an applicant's photo. For those resumes that did include a photo, researchers manipulated 100 images of men and women to generate attractive and unattractive photographs. They did this by using eyes-to-mouth and eye-to-eye distance ratios that previous research classified as attractive or unattractive.

All resumes were randomly assigned common names, schooling levels, and fake addresses. For each job opening, researchers submitted six fictitious resumes: for both genders, they included one resume of an attractive candidate, one of an unattractive candidate, and one resume without a photograph. Between April 21 and June 20, 2010, researchers submitted a total of 2,540 resumes.

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Researchers found that resumes with attractive photos received 36 percent more callbacks than those with unattractive photos. Generally, 10.3 percent of resumes with attractive photos received callbacks, compared to 7.6 percent among resumes of unattractive photos. Attractiveness did not affect men and women differently. Attractive applicants also received callbacks sooner—around 30 percent faster than resumes with unattractive photos. The inclusion of a photo, by itself, did not affect

callback rates or response times. These findings suggest that there is undue labor market discrimination against less attractive applicants.

While beauty positively affected overall response rates, its importance varied substantially along occupation types and gender. Administrative office jobs and customer-facing food preparation jobs were the main drivers behind different overall callback rates for attractive and unattractive people. For both these occupations, women, specifically, received a “beauty premium” for applications to secretary, receptionist, and general customer service positions.

López Bóo, Florencia, Martín A. Rossi, and Sergio S. Urzua. 2013. "The labor market return to an attractive face: Evidence from a field experiment." Economics Letters 118(1): 170-172.