

The Role of Physical Attractiveness in Marketing Education: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

Recent work on the relationship between class attendance and student performance found that student absenteeism impacted negatively on students' grade or scores performance (Stanca, 2006). This research aims to examine the relationship between students' perceived physical attractiveness and lecture attendance. The findings indicated that most students agreed that they will attend the face-to-face lecture more often if the lecturer is 'funny'. In particular, the male respondents of the study claimed that they would be more likely to attend lecture if the lecturer is 'attractive' and 'good-looking'. Such results may be an indicator that physical attractiveness of the instructor can be one of the motivating factors for students to attend face-to-face lecture sessions.

Keywords: Lecture attendance, physical attractiveness, marketing education

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Introduction

It has been suggested that students' participation in lectures and tutorials is declining (Ramsden, 2003). Studies in the past have examined the reasons behind declining attendance, including the availability of online recorded lecture (Ho and Weaver, 2009), students' demand for more interactive mode of learning (Harasim, 1999; Ramsden, 2003), and the preference for block mode of classes within shorter study period (Ho and Polonsky, 2009).

Engaging students is preferred by many academics; although this requires that students are prepared and willing to actively participate ensuring classes are not one-way communication (Collier, 1985). Lack of preparation and engagement can lead to limited reflection on content and it sometimes appears that students are more concerned with the 'answers' rather than why an answer is applicable (Keddie and Trotter, 1998).

One implication for Generation Y students is that they are forcing universities to rethink education curriculum and delivery to integrate more flexibility (Ali and Ho, 2006; Kiyoshi, 2006; Nimon, 2007), which will enable them to engage with students (Grant 2001; Kretovics, Crowe, and Hyun 2005). Recent research shows that tertiary students enrolled in marketing units preferred to study in a flexible mode as compared with traditional face-to-face teaching (Ho and Polonsky 2009). This has led to new teaching methods and flexible learning approaches being constantly researched in tertiary education sector (Graham and Scarborough 1999; Ho and Ali 2008; McLoughlin 2002).

This research aims to examine the relationship between students' perceived physical attractiveness and lecture attendance. Although there has been extensive discussions in the literature on the respective area of 'physical attractiveness' and 'lecture attendance', there has been little examination done on the relationship between the two constructs, particularly in the context of marketing education. It is of the interest of the present authors to investigate (i) the relative importance of instructors' physical attractiveness in attending lectures and (ii) the differences between male and female in terms of their perceived importance of instructors' physical attractiveness.

Literature Review

The effects of physical attractiveness on consumer behaviour have been well documented in the marketing literature (Ohanian, 1990; Till & Busler, 2001). Research has shown that individuals are judged (and sometimes treated) according to their level of physical attractiveness (Bonds-Raacke and Raacke, 2007). Kardes, Cronley and Cline (2008) claimed that majority of peoples automatically assume attractive person to be intelligent, kind, and honest.

As in today's market, marketers believe that using attractive models are more persuasive and have a more positive influence on consumer attitudes and behaviour (Schiffman, Benfall, O'cass, Paladino, Warn and Kanuk 2008). Lindquist and Sirgy (2006) provided a similar

explanation. They explained that sources considered attractive by target audiences are more persuasive than those that are unattractive (Lindquist and Sirgy 2006).

In the realm of education literature, studies in the past have found that physical attractiveness of instructors are positively related to students' performance. Gurung and Vespia (2007) found that students could learn more, earn higher grades, and like the class better when taught by physically attractive instructors who are 'likeable', 'good-looking', 'well-dressed', and 'approachable'. Similarly, Hamermesh and Parker (2005) found that physically attractive instructors receive higher evaluation ratings from the students. In addition, the researchers found that the impact of physical attractiveness is larger for male than for female instructors, suggesting there are significant differences between male and female respondents in their perceived importance of instructors' physical attractiveness.

The present authors propose two hypotheses relating to the effects of physical attractiveness in marketing education. First, consistent with the findings of the previous studies in this area, we hypothesise that students will be more motivated to attend lecture session if the lecturer is physically attractive (H1). Second, we hypothesise that there are differences between male and female in their perceived importance of instructors' physical attractiveness (H2). In addition of the 'typical' dimensions of physical attractiveness incorporated in previous studies, we also incorporate one element (funny) to examine whether the frequent use of humour within the lecture session could encourage attendance.

Case Study and Method

This study focuses on on-campus students enrolled in three undergraduate marketing units. Students are currently pursuing their Bachelor of Business degree at the Lilydale campus of Swinburne University of Technology (SUT). These three units, Marketing Behaviour (LBM200); Integrated Marketing Communications (LMB204) and Product Management (LBM207) are the compulsory second-level courses in the marketing major or an elective for other business student.

Classes for each unit comprised a 90-minute lecture and a 90-minute tutorial each week of a 12-week semester. Every lecture delivered was automatically recorded (using the Lectoria recording system), and recordings were made available to students via their online Blackboard sites as mp3 or mpeg files. To pass these units, students had to pass the final examination and complete all other assessment components (three pieces of assessment per unit). All the students had been in the business program for at least one semester and thus had undertaken other business units in the similar mode of delivery. Also, the only pre-requisite for these three units is Marketing Principles (LBM100). In other words, students enrolled into any unit as mentioned above have already past LBM100 in the previous semester.

Data was collected using a brief paper-based questionnaire administered in the final week of semester 1, 2010. Questionnaires were conducted in both lectures and in tutorial classes, in an attempt to get the highest possible response rate (including students who regularly skip lectures). The questionnaire survey required between five and ten minutes to complete. Students were informed that their participation was anonymous and not part of the assessment regime of the class. A total of 157 respondents participated in the study.

Results and Discussion

As shown in table 1, gender of respondents was evenly distributed, with 52.2% indicated for female and 47.8% male. All the respondents have already completed at least one of the six semesters of a Bachelor of Business degree program at SUT. In total, over 41% of the respondents in this study identified that they have attended at least eight lectures during the semester. However, some respondents (12.1%) claimed that they do not attend to any lectures at all.

Table 1 - Profiles of Respondents (n=157)

| Demographic | Categories | Percent |
|--------------------|------------------------|---------|
| Gender | Male | 47.8 |
| | Female | 52.2 |
| Year of Study | 1st year | 5.7 |
| | 2nd year | 54.1 |
| | 3rd year | 37.6 |
| | 4th year | 2.5 |
| Lecture Attendance | Do not attend lectures | 12.1 |
| | Attend 2-4 lectures | 22.3 |
| | Attend 5-7 lectures | 24.2 |
| | Attend 8-10 lectures | 28.0 |
| | Attend all lectures | 13.4 |

The authors adapted Ohanian's (1990) scale of physical attractiveness which was originally designed to assess the credibility of celebrity endorsers in consumer context. Respondents were asked to rate their agreement/disagreement with five statements relating to the importance of physical attractiveness (I would come to the lecture session more frequently if the lecturer is attractive/good-looking/classy/elegant/funny) using five-point Likert-scale. For the purpose of this study, the original attribute 'sexy' was substituted with 'funny' to suit the higher education context under examination.

Scale Validity and Reliability

The scale was adapted from existing scale (Ohanian, 1990) and thus there was no need to perform factor analysis to refine the scale. Reliability Analysis was employed in SPSS and found that the reliability of the scale improved substantially ($\alpha = .908$) after the deletion of 'funny' from the construct. On the basis of these results, it was decided to analyse 'funny' as separate variable for the hypotheses under examination.

The Importance of Physical Attractiveness

It was hypothesised that the mean rating of physical attractiveness exceeds the test value of 3.0, which is the neutral value in the five-point Likert-scale. However, as depicted in table 2, it was revealed that the mean scores of respective items (with the exception of 'funny' which is excluded from the physical attractiveness construct) fall below the test value of 3.0.

Table 2 - Mean Scores of Physical Attractiveness

| | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|--------------|--------|----------------|
| Attractive | 2.9427 | 1.48601 |
| Classy | 2.7261 | 1.28408 |
| Good-Looking | 2.6815 | 1.45900 |
| Elegant | 2.5605 | 1.28271 |
| Funny | 3.9427 | 1.16708 |

One sample t-test was conducted to examine whether the differences between the sample mean and the test value is significant at .05 level. The results suggest that respondents' perceived importance of 'classy', 'good-looking', and 'elegant' is significantly lower than the neutral value on average, suggesting that respondents do not see these elements as motivating factors for lecture attendance. The results, however, reveal that respondents' perceived importance of 'funny' is significantly higher than the test value ($t = 10.121$, $p < .001$), suggesting that respondents are likely to come to lecture more often if the lecturer is funny.

Gender Differences

We employed Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to test the second hypothesis with the four items of 'physical attractiveness' and 'funny' as the dependent variables and 'gender' as the factor. From the table, it can be observed that there are significant differences between male and female respondents in the perceived importance of 'attractive' and 'goodlooking' in attending lectures. An examination of the sample means reveals that male students' perceived importance of 'attractive' ($\bar{x} = 3.19$) is higher than the female respondents ($\bar{x} = 2.72$). Similar results were found for the perceived importance of 'good-looking' (male $\bar{x} = 2.99$; female $\bar{x} = 2.40$). The results thus lend support to the second hypothesis of this study.

Table 3 - Gender differences on perceived importance of physical attractiveness

| | | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
|--------------|----------------|----------------|-----|-------------|-------|------|
| Attractive | Between Groups | 8.549 | 1 | 8.549 | 3.944 | .049 |
| | Within Groups | 335.935 | 155 | 2.167 | | |
| | Total | 344.484 | 156 | | | |
| Classy | Between Groups | 4.015 | 1 | 4.015 | 2.458 | .119 |
| | Within Groups | 253.208 | 155 | 1.634 | | |
| | Total | 257.223 | 156 | | | |
| Good-looking | Between Groups | 13.370 | 1 | 13.370 | 6.503 | .012 |
| | Within Groups | 318.706 | 155 | 2.056 | | |
| | Total | 332.076 | 156 | | | |
| Elegant | Between Groups | 4.289 | 1 | 4.289 | 2.634 | .107 |
| | Within Groups | 252.386 | 155 | 1.628 | | |
| | Total | 256.675 | 156 | | | |
| Funny | Between Groups | 1.758 | 1 | 1.758 | 1.293 | .257 |
| | Within Groups | 210.726 | 155 | 1.360 | | |
| | Total | 212.484 | 156 | | | |

Conclusion and Future Research

The present paper is a useful report to explain that the role of physical attractiveness is relatively important for marketing educators. While more research is necessary, this initial exploratory study showed that marketing students do not see 'classy', 'good-looking', and 'elegant' as motivating factors for lecture attendance. In-fact students claimed that they will attend the face-to-face lecture more often if the lecturer is funny. Also, it is interesting to learn that our male students claimed that they will attend lecture more often if the lecturer is physically attractive.

One of the limitations of the study is that it was restricted to only one tertiary institution in Australia. It is envisaged that future research will be undertaken across different universities in this area. Also, further data needs to be collected and analysed in any other discipline in business to see if students from other business major will have similar perceptions of their counterparts in marketing.

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