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Facial First Impressions: The Influence of Babyface Overgeneralization on Agents' Online Profiles

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Have you ever noticed how platforms like Zillow and Rover prominently display profile pictures? It's no accident. Our faces are powerful communicators, even online. In the world of real estate, a profile picture might be your only chance to make a good first impression, and research shows it can significantly influence how clients perceive you. Online profile pictures on Zillow, Realtor, or a real estate company's website, often the only pre-interaction glimpse of a real estate agent, significantly influence consumer decisions, such as whether to leave online reviews.

Facial cues act as potent first impressions, shaping judgments of trustworthiness, competence, and likeability. We investigated whether online profile photos have this facial first impression effect, demonstrating how perceived facial characteristics influence consumer engagement with real estate agents.



There is an interesting phenomenon called the "babyface overgeneralization effect," which suggests that individuals with childlike features are attributed certain personality traits. For example, prior research shows that narrower jaws, smaller noses, and rounder eyes are perceived as a "babyface." Such individuals are perceived as kind and warm, while mature faces imply competence and intelligence. Our research delves into this effect by testing its impact on the number of online reviews received by real estate agent based on their profile picture facial maturity. Furthermore, we explore whether this effect is different for men and women. We explore this effect for both high involvement services (real estate) and low involvement services (prepaid phone plan).

Our Study

Leveraging real-world data and cutting-edge AI facial recognition technology, we test if there is a link between profile picture facial maturity, gender, and the number of online reviews real estate agents receive. We analyzed real-world data from Zillow, studying 1,000 real estate agents' profile pictures to understand the impact of a "babyface" on the number of salespeople's online review numbers. Is there a correlation between a real estate agent's perceived babyface and their reviews on Zillow?

Using Microsoft facial recognition technology, specifically Azure, we assessed each agent's facial features and assigned "babyface" scores while controlling for factors such as real estate agents' attractiveness, age, and local demographics (e.g., median household income).

Our analysis revealed a negative relationship between a real estate agent's "babyface" score and the number of online reviews they received. Additionally, "babyface" features had a negative effect on review numbers for male agents, whereas it had no significant impact on female agents' online review numbers. Overall, our findings suggest that having a more mature appearance in online profile pictures may lead to higher review numbers, particularly for male agents operating in high-involvement contexts such as real estate sales.

In a subsequent study involving over two hundred consumers, we investigated consumer intent to leave online reviews based on perceptions of salespersons' babyfaces ("babyface" vs. "mature"). Interestingly, for high-involvement purchases like car insurance, consumers expressed a tendency to leave more reviews for salespeople with mature faces. Conversely, for low-involvement purchases such as a one-time prepaid phone plan, consumers were more inclined to leave reviews for salespeople with babyfaces.

Real Estate Implications

In the online platform realm, consumer reviews wield considerable influence, making our research particularly pertinent for platform managers. We have shed light on the significant impact of real estate agent profile pictures on review acquisition. When consumers search for real estate services online, their first impression is often based on visual cues, with the profile picture playing a crucial role.

Our research has revealed that for high involvement services, such as real estate transactions, profile pictures conveying maturity tend to attract more online reviews. This not only benefits the platform by driving increased traffic but also enhances its appeal compared to competitors. Platforms like Zillow and Realtor.com could strategically encourage real estate agents to adopt mature-looking profile photos to boost review numbers and enhance their online presence. For real estate agents aiming to project maturity, professional attire can play a pivotal role in shaping their image. Conversely, platforms like Fiverr, which primarily cater to low-involvement services, might suggest a more youthful appearance for freelancers to encourage review engagement. It's important to note that this distinction primarily impacts men.

The difference between a "babyface" and a mature face transcends cultural and age boundaries, making our recommendations universally applicable. This emphasizes the importance of our findings in guiding platform managers and real estate professionals toward effectively optimizing their online presence.

Recommend Reading

Yim, Alexis, Brad Price, Raj Agnihotri, and Annie Peng Cui (2023), "Do Salespeople's Online Profile Pictures Predict the Number of Online Reviews? Effect of a Babyface," *European Journal of Marketing*, 57(7), 1886-1911.

About the Authors

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As a marketing researcher, Dr. Alexis Yim (PhD – West Virginia University) has explored the effects of cuteness in marketplaces and factors influencing salespeople's performance. These works have been presented at the American Marketing Association (AMA) Conference and Decision Science Conference and published in the *European Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, and the Handbook of Cross-Cultural Marketing Research. Her work has won Best Overall Paper at Proceedings of the International Roadside Safety Conference and the AMA Sales SIG's Doctoral Dissertation Proposal Competition. She also contributed to research at the Midwest Roadside Safety Facility, the Nebraska Manufacturing Partnership Extension, and the Nebraska Center for Entrepreneurship. Professor Yim worked for Fortune 100 companies, including Dell and Pfizer, before earning her doctorate.

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Dr. Brad Price's (PhD – University of Minnesota, Statistics) research interests are in developing novel machine learning and statistical computing methodologies, theory, and applications, most recently with specific applications in healthcare and business operations. Dr. Price has published in top journals such as the *Journal of Machine Learning Research*, *Journal of Computational and Graphical Statistics*, *Production and Operations Management*, *European Journal of Marketing*, *INFORMS Journal of Applied Analytics*, *Journal of Trauma and Acute Care Surgery*, *Information and Technology Management*, among other top tier outlets in statistics, machine learning, business, and healthcare. His research has also been externally funded by external entities such as the National Institute of Health, the National Science Foundation, and the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources. Price has also won awards for teaching, research, and service, including a Department of Army Civilian Service Medal for his role in West Virginia's COVID-19 pandemic response. He advises numerous student projects in the Master of Science in Business Data Analytics programs. Dr. Price serves as Co-Director of Biostatistics, Epidemiology, and Research Design Core at West Virginia Clinical and Translational Science Institute, where he works with a team to utilize machine learning, data, and technology to impact healthcare outcomes in rural America. He also assists in Data-Driven WV, a student experiential learning and engagement center around data analytics, machine learning, and technology.

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Dr. Raj Agnihotri (PhD – Kent State University) currently serves as the Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal Marketing Theory & Practice* and has published over 70 articles in leading scholarly journals, including several FT-50 publications. He is considered a global authority in digital mediation in the sales processes. Three peer-reviewed scientific studies examining the research impact of authors in digital and social media marketing in the B2B domain rank him among the Top-4 impactful authors internationally. His work has been cited over 7000 times (h-index = 36; i10 = 61). He has been actively involved in executive education and has guided industry professionals from North America, Brazil, Europe, and India. Raj is a co-author of *ABCs of Relationship Selling* (McGraw Hill, 13 ed.), a global market leader in sales classes, and its contents can be found in four international versions. Numerous sales trainers worldwide use its selling process to prepare their salespeople. Previously, Raj held the first John Merrill Endowed Professorship in Consultative Sales at the University of Texas at Arlington. He had served as Freeman Professor of Sales Leadership and Chair of Marketing at Ohio University, where he served as the academic director of the Schey Sales Centre and launched its Consumer Research Center.

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Dr. Annie Peng Cui's (PhD – Kent State University) research focuses on firms' branding, pricing and international marketing strategies. Her scholarly contributions have been published in reputable journals such as *Journal of International Marketing*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, *Industrial Marketing Management*, among others. She is a co-author of *International Marketing*, 11th ed. Dr. Cui's approach to her role as a marketing researcher is marked by her commitment to bridging the gap between academic insights and practical business applications. Her focus lies in pioneering cutting-edge research that directly engages with and resolves real-world business challenges. She provides service to the marketing profession by serving as the Managing Editor for *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice* and a board member on American Marketing Association's Global SIG (SIG Chair 2014-2017).



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