

FACIAL APPEARANCE, GENDER, AND CREDIBILITY IN TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

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ABSTRACT: The facial appearance of television spokespersons and the trustworthiness and expertise of the appeals delivered by them were independently rated. Babyfaced persons and females delivered communications which were less expert, but more trustworthy, than those delivered by maturefaced persons and males. These effects were independent of the spokespersons' perceived age, attractiveness, and amount of smiling. The findings are consistent with past research which has demonstrated that babyfaced people are perceived as less knowledgeable, but more honest, than those who are maturefaced.

Research has repeatedly demonstrated that perceivers attribute childlike traits to adults who exhibit a babyish facial appearance. More specifically, men and women who are babyfaced are deemed to be more honest, submissive, and warm, but less intellectually astute, than those who are maturefaced (Berry & Brownlow, 1989; Berry & McArthur, 1985; 1986; Keating, 1985; McArthur & Apatow, 1983-1984; Zebrowitz & Montepare, 1990). These perceptions of babyfaced people hold true for perceivers of various cultures (Keating, Mazur, & Segall, 1981; McArthur & Berry, 1987) and ages (Keating & Bai, 1986; Montepare & Zebrowitz-McArthur, 1989), and they are independent of the perceived age and attractiveness of target stimuli.

The tendency for people to attribute childlike psychological qualities to adults with a childlike facial appearance has been explained as an "overgeneralization" effect (Berry & McArthur, 1986). Because it is so adaptive for the facial features of infants and children to specify their non-

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meaning, and dependent qualities, these qualities are also detected in adults with similar features. Thus, adults with large, round eyes, and small chins are perceived to be weak, naive, honest, and submissive—just as are the children whom they resemble.

Although this body of research is interesting in its own right, it has been noted (e.g., Berry & McArthur, 1986; Schmitt, 1987) that it lacks ecological validity. Specifically, it is important to consider whether facial appearance experts' predictable influence in contexts where complex social information in addition to facial information is available to perceivers. It is also necessary to examine whether these effects obtain in a non-laboratory context.

The generalizability of babyface effects to informationally complex situations has been addressed in a recent set of studies by Zebrowitz, McArthur, and her colleagues. An experiment involving a simulated trial demonstrated that the conviction rate for babyfaced male defendants was higher when the crime was one of negligence rather than intent, whereas the conviction rate for maturefaced defendants was higher when the alleged crime was intentional rather than negligent (Berry & Zebrowitz-McArthur, 1988). These results were attributed to the fact that maturefaced males are seen as shrewd, and thus more able to commit a crime of intent, whereas babyfaced men are seen as naive, and thus apt to be negligent. Zebrowitz, Fennenbaum, and Goldstein (1990) have further demonstrated that babyfaced people, who are perceived as warm, were more likely to be judged as more qualified for a job requiring warmth and nurturance than were maturefaced applicants with equivalent credentials. While both of these studies were simulations, the results suggest that facial babyishness continues to impact impressions in a predictable manner when other information is provided to perceivers.

As noted previously, it is also important to consider whether facial appearance exerts a predictable influence on people's perceptions and behavior in a non-laboratory situation. One situation where facial appearance and impressions are important is the television commercial, where advertisers spend a good deal of time and money finding the "ideal" spokesperson to promote a product. The present research addresses the question of whether actors and actresses are cast into commercials on the basis of their facial appearance.

Television commercials typically have one of two bases of credibility: trustworthiness or expertise. Trustworthy appeals typically utilize a spokesperson who is a product-user, whereas expert appeals utilize a spokesperson who is an authority (Atkins & Block, 1983; McArthur & Resko, 1975).

Trustworthiness has been defined as the degree to which a source is judged to be honest and communicating that which is believed to be most valid (McGuire, 1985). Expertise is the extent to which a source is perceived to have valid information (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953), and to be aware of the facts regarding an issue (McGuire, 1969).

What qualities of actors might influence whether they are perceived as trustworthy or expert? Gender might be one such quality. Females are most likely to be portrayed as trustworthy product users while males are typically cast as authoritative experts (McArthur & Resko, 1975). Based on these findings, it was predicted that the basis of credibility for commercials featuring female spokespersons would be trustworthiness more than expertise, while the reverse would be true for commercials featuring male spokespersons. Facial appearance may also play a role in determining the type of commercial in which an actor or actress is cast. Because facial babyishness increases perceived honesty, babyfaced people may be viewed as trustworthy. On the other hand, maturefaced people, who are seen as intellectually astute, may be viewed as expert. Therefore, it was predicted that when a maturefaced actor or actress appears as a spokesperson in a commercial, the basis of credibility for that commercial will be expertise more than trustworthiness. Conversely, when a babyfaced actor or actress appears as a spokesperson, the basis of credibility will be trustworthiness more than expertise.

Method

Commercial Sample

Television commercials were videotaped during weekday broadcasts on three major networks. In order to obtain a wide variety of commercials, morning, afternoon, and evening time slots were sampled. Only commercials which utilized one or two adult actors and actresses who had speaking parts were included in the final sample.

Advertisements with children or known celebrities as spokespersons were not included. Celebrities were excluded from the sample both because judges may have already formed impressions of celebrities due to their exposure in the media and because research has indicated that commercials utilizing celebrities as spokespersons have different bases of credibility from those which use unknown actors and actresses (Atkins & Block, 1983). The final sample consisted of 150 commercials; sixty featured male spokespersons and 90 featured female spokespersons.

Communication Coding

Typewritten transcripts containing verbatim dialogue and the general scenario of each commercial were prepared. References to the communicator's age and gender were omitted to reduce the possibility that this information would influence subsequent ratings. A sample transcript is provided in the Appendix. Classification of the type of appeal used in the communications was based on whether the spokesperson appeared primarily to be an authoritative expert or primarily a trustworthy product user. This type of criterion has been used in past research to distinguish types of commercial appeals (Friedman & Friedman, 1979; McArthur & Resko, 1975). The instructions provided to coders incorporated the definitions of trustworthiness (McGuire, 1985) and expertise (Howland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953):

An expert appeal comes from a spokesperson who appears to be knowledgeable communicating information that is objective and valid. More often than not, an expert is presented as a knowledgeable person who has all the facts. Expert spokespersons tend to give 'factual' evidence on behalf of a product. Thus, they may use statistics, scientific information, doctor's reports, and the like. If expert spokespersons are product users, it is because they have all the facts about it and believe those facts.

A trustworthy appeal comes from a spokesperson who appears to be sincerely and honestly communicating information he or she believes in. More often than not, a trustworthy appeal uses a spokesperson who is a product user. This person is either seen using the product or acting as though he or she uses the product regularly and will continue to do so. Trustworthy spokespersons tend to give 'testimonial' evidence on behalf of a product. Thus, they may talk about what they as product users like and believe. If trustworthy spokespersons report facts about a product, these are based primarily on their use of it and their personal belief in its value.

Two coders (one male, one female) were paid a nominal fee to complete the transcript coding. Each went through a sample of five commercial transcripts with the experimenter, discussing the aforementioned criteria for classification. They then individually read a subset of 95 of the total 150 transcripts in a random order and judged the type of appeal in each communication. Due to the fact that communications could have elements of both expertise and trustworthiness, judges rated the degree to which each appeal was expert and trustworthy on seven-point scales with endpoints labelled "very expert"/"not at all expert" and "very trustworthy"/"not at all trustworthy."

Spokesperson Facial Appearance Ratings

A separate group of two male and eight female judges were paid a nominal fee to rate the appearance of spokespersons in soundless color videotapes of the commercials in one of four orders. Each judge individually reviewed a sample of five commercials with the experimenter until he or she was comfortable with the procedure, and then made the remainder of the ratings unassisted. Each judge was provided with a list indicating who was the spokesperson in each commercial. The videotapes were played without sound so that the spokespersons' vocal qualities and the content of the communication would not influence judges' ratings. Seven-point scales were used for judgments of each communicator's facial maturity (endpoints labeled "babyfaced"/"maturefaced") and attractiveness (endpoints labeled "very attractive"/"very unattractive"). In addition, raters judged the range in which they estimated each communicator's age to fall from six age spans (16-20, 21-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, and 60+ years).

Spokesperson Affect Ratings

Two additional coders (one male, one female) viewed soundless color videotapes of the commercials and rated the amount of smiling by each spokesperson. These data were collected in order to determine whether smiling was confounded with gender and/or babyfacedness. Since babyfaced people are perceived as warm, they may smile more often than their maturefaced counterparts, and this, rather than facial structure *per se*, could account for any differences in the types of communications they were assigned. The videotapes were played without sound so that neither linguistic nor paralinguistic cues would influence the ratings. Judgments were made on 7-point bi-polar scales (endpoints labelled "not smiling at all"/"smiling a lot"),

Results*Reliabilities*

Acceptable inter-rater agreement was revealed for communication expertise ($r(93) = +.75$), and for communication trustworthiness ($r(93) = +.68$, both $ps < .001$). Therefore, one judge completed the ratings of the remaining transcripts. For the entire sample, the mean expertise judgment was $M = 2.70$ ($s = 2.06$), while the mean communication trust-

TABLE 1
Correlations Between Communication Credibility Ratings and Perceived Spokesperson Age, Attractiveness, and Smiling

Appearance Variable	Credibility Measure	
	Trustworthiness	Expertise
Age ^a	-.39***	.35***
Attractiveness ^b	.27***	-.17*
Smiling ^b	.19*	-.19*

^a*M* = 146, ^b*M* = 145
**p* < .05
***p* < .001
****p* < .0001
Note: Degrees of freedom vary due to missing data. The label provided represents the high end of a scale. All *p* values reported are two-tailed.

worthiness rating was *M* = 4.60 (*s* = 1.94). The facial maturity, age and attractiveness judgments were also highly reliable (alphas = .80, .93 and .94, respectively), as were ratings on the smiling measure ($t(146) = .74, p < .001$). Thus, a mean rating was computed for each spokesperson for each of these dimensions and used in subsequent analyses. For the entire sample, the mean rating of age (*M* = 3.13, *s* = 1.09), attractiveness (*M* = 4.78, *s* = 1.09), and smiling (*M* = 4.61, *s* = 1.96) demonstrated that, in general, the spokespersons were neither overly young or old, nor very attractive or very unattractive.

The Relationship of Facial Appearance and Gender to Credibility

In order to determine whether babyfaced and maturefaced spokespersons delivered different types of communications, spokespersons were split into high (babyfaced) and low (maturefaced) groups based on a median split of their mean babyfaced rating.¹ The median split was calculated within gender since the median for males (*Mdn* = 3.7) was lower than that

¹ Correlational analyses between mean facial babyfacedness ratings and communication trustworthiness and expertise were considered but rejected due to low variability in the mean facial babyfacedness scores. Thus, a median split by facial appearance was used to form a babyfaced and maturefaced group within each gender.

TABLE 2
Mean Ratings of Communication Trustworthiness and Expertise for Babyfaced and Maturefaced Male and Female Spokespersons

Dependent Measure	Spokesperson			
	Male		Female	
	Babyfaced ^a	Maturefaced ^a	Babyfaced ^b	Maturefaced ^b
Communication				
Expertise	3.18	4.39	1.64	2.44
Communication				
Trustworthiness	4.21	2.96	5.50	4.98

^a*n* = 28
^b*n* = 44
^c*n* = 45
Note: The label provided represents the high end of the scale.

for females (*Mdn* = 4.1). This facial maturity factor was crossed with spokesperson gender and two 2 (Spokesperson Face Type) X 2 (Spokesperson Gender) analyses of covariance employing perceived spokesperson age, attractiveness, and amount of smiling as covariates were conducted with communication expertise and trustworthiness as dependent measures. Perceived spokesperson age, attractiveness, and smiling were covariates in these analyses since all three of these variables were significantly correlated with communication trustworthiness and expertise (see Table 1).

As predicted, maturefaced spokespersons (*M* = 3.19) were given communications independently judged as more expert than those given to babyfaced spokespersons (*M* = 2.24), $F(1, 138) = 8.28, p = .01$ (see Table 2). The predicted main effect for gender also emerged, as males (*M* = 3.79) delivered communications independently rated as more expert than those delivered by females (*M* = 2.04, $F(1, 138) = 13.37, p < .001$). These effects were independent of the perceived age, attractiveness, and amount of smiling exhibited by the spokespersons. The interaction of face type and gender did not approach significance, $F(1, 138) < 1$, indicating that the predicted effect of spokesperson facial appearance was not qualified by gender of the spokesperson.

As predicted, babyfaced spokespersons ($M = 5.00$) were given communications independently judged as more trustworthy than those given to maturefaced spokespersons ($M = 4.21$), $F(1, 138) = 6.39$, $p = .01$, and females ($M = 5.24$) were given more trustworthy communications than males ($M = 3.59$), $F(1, 138) = 10.43$, $p < .01$. These effects were independent of the age, attractiveness, and smiling of the spokespersons.² As was the case for communication expertise, the interaction of face type and gender was not significant, $F(1, 138) < 1$.

Discussion

The results of this study reveal that actors' facial maturity and gender influence the type of commercial communications they are chosen to deliver. Consistent with previous research demonstrating that babyfaced people are perceived as more naive and honest, babyfaced spokespersons delivered appeals that were less expert and more trustworthy than those delivered by their maturefaced counterparts. Consistent with other investigations concerning the nature of gender roles in commercials (e.g., McArthur & Rosko, 1975), males delivered communications that were more expert and less trustworthy than those delivered by females. This corresponds to the sex stereotype that males are more logical and objective, and thus more likely to use facts and figures to argue a point, and that females are more emotional, and thus more likely to use personal testimonials (Deaux, 1985).

These findings indicate that television producers casting commercials are guided by whether the actors' facial appearance and gender reinforce the image of credibility in the commercial copy. Producers seem to operate on the tacit or explicit assumption that maturefaced people and males 'look right' delivering expert messages, whereas babyfaced people and females 'fit the part' for trustworthy communications. The decisions made by television producers have real consequences: If their casting choices are not convincing, their product will not sell. It would thus be interesting to determine whether the favored combinations of facial appearance or gen-

²While the effects of facial appearance and gender on credibility were independent of perceived spokesperson age, attractiveness, and smiling, the latter three variables were related to credibility. Indeed, perceived age was a significant covariate both in the analysis for communication expertise ($F(1, 144) = 18.20$, $p < .001$) and communication trustworthiness ($F(1, 144) = 14.02$, $p < .001$). Perceived attractiveness at the level of marginal significance in the expertise ANOVA ($F(1, 144) = 3.21$, $p = .08$), although it had no significant effect for communication trustworthiness ($F(1, 144) < 1$, n.s.). Similarly, smiling was only a marginally significant covariate in the analysis for expertise ($F(1, 144) = 2.96$, $p = .09$), but it had no significant effect on communication trustworthiness ($F(1, 144) = 1.61$, n.s.).

der and credibility documented in the present study are in fact more persuasive than other combinations. Some evidence to suggest that they may be is provided by research demonstrating that information about a stimulus person which is consistent with the person's facial maturity is more believable to perceivers (Berry & Zebrowitz-McArthur, 1988), and that maturefaced female communicators are viewed as more expert but less trustworthy than babyfaced female communicators delivering the same persuasive message (Brownlow, 1989).

The results of this study address the concerns of those (e.g., Berry & McArthur, 1986; Schmitt, 1987) who have questioned the ecological validity of past research utilizing static facial photographs to assess differential perceptions of people varying in facial babyishness. The fact that the relationship between the perceived babyfacedness of dynamic, televised targets and real-world casting decisions could be accurately predicted from trait ratings of babyfaced targets depicted in static photographs affirms the ecological validity of past research findings. It also reveals that the documented impact of facial babyishness on impressions can be extended in a predictable manner to complex decisions made outside the laboratory. Finally, this study demonstrates that much can be learned by observing the behaviors of social influence agents as they occur naturally in the world (cf. McGuire, 1973).

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Appendix

Sample transcript

(Spokesperson talks to pet dog)

"Comon, don't hold a grudge. I didn't know that Alpo beef-flavored dinner cost the same as those other dry dog foods. I never even looked! I mean, who would have thought that Alpo, the one with more meal protein than ten pounds of siltoin, cost the same as those others. Tell you what: you forgive me, and I'll forget what you did to my shoes."
(Kisses dog)