

Don't Judge A Book By Its Cover Facial Attractiveness Effect in Online Consultation Services

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Abstract

Consumers face high uncertainty when they make decision and evaluation on online consultation services (e.g., online medical consultation). With limited information available, a service provider's facial attractiveness might be used as a significant heuristic cue. This research examines whether facial attractiveness serves as a premium or a penalty in this highly professional context yet. In addition, it provides meticulous insights on how facial attractiveness influences consumers' decision and evaluation on different stages of online service encounters (i.e., pre-consultation choice, and post-consultation assessment). We conducted two studies using real data from two online consultation service platforms in China, involving observations on 856 lawyers on an online legal counselling platform and on 6,072 doctors on an online healthcare platform. Results indicate that a consultation service provider's facial attractiveness has negative effect on consumers' pre-consumption choice but positive effect on post-consumption assessment. Moreover, the facial attractiveness effect is significant only for junior consultation providers, but not for senior providers. This paper takes a process perspective and reveals the dynamic nature of the visual effects in different stages of online consultation service. Findings provide initial contribution to research on visual design and online service.

Subject Areas: *Consumer Services, Decision-Making, Electronic Commerce and Internet Marketing, Information Systems, Service Marketing*

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