

The Role Of Beauty In Tennis TV-Viewership

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“What is beautiful is good,” the ancient Greek lyric poet Sappho wrote over 2,500 years ago. Indeed, several studies in social sciences, anthropology, psychology, and economics have shown various effects of physical attractiveness. Hamermesh and Biddle (1994) introduced the idea of a beauty premium, stating that attractiveness pays: good looking people earn more than average looking people, while plain people not only earn less than average looking people, but are additionally penalized.

Curiously, the concept of beauty has gained little attention in sports research, particularly in sports economics. Using a survey method, Trail and James (2001) show that physical attractiveness is a motivational factor for sports consumption in Major League Baseball. Berri, Simmons, van Gilder, and O’Neill (2011) put forward that facial symmetry is positively related to earnings of NFL quarterbacks. A recent attempt by Meier and Konjer (2015) empirically analyses German TV ratings for tennis games between 2009 and 2010, finding no evidence for a beauty premium. Given the existing literature in several fields and particularly in pulchro-nomics, that is, the economics of physical attractiveness, this finding is unexpected and calls for a new approach to understand the relationship between physical attractiveness and tennis TV-Viewership. In comparison to Meier and Konjer (2015), we analyze a data set over a larger period of time and use a software-based algorithm to derive facial symmetry scores. Moreover, the relative lack of demand studies for individual- compared to team-sports motivates us to better understand TV-viewership by focusing on tennis. Previous research puts forward that quality (e.g., aggregate talent on the field), competitive balance (e.g., opponents of similar ability playing each other), and home bias play significant roles in TV-viewership.

In this study, we examine the relationship between tennis players’ beauty, as measured by facial symmetry, and TV-viewership by analyzing 622 live tennis matches from Grand Slam tournaments played between 2000 and 2016. Facial symmetry has been shown to be a strong predictor of attractiveness (Perrett, Burt, Penton-Voak, Lee, Rowland, & Edwards, 1999; Rhodes, Proffitt, Grady, & Sumich, 1998). To derive facial symmetry scores, we use a software-based algorithm to analyze headshots of the 84 female and 90 male players within our sample. The software calculates symmetry scores between 0 (not symmetric) and 100 (very symmetric) using a 14 step process where several facial features (i.e., chin, hairline, ears, nose, mouth etc.) are identified. Estimating a model that includes control variables for player quality, competitive balance, and a set of dummy variables for home bias, ethnicity, rounds, and tournaments, we show that beauty plays a positive role in tennis TV-viewership. The beauty premium is especially strong for female players in subsample analyses, i.e., when regional players are excluded. Moreover, our results show that quality (i.e., aggregate talent) and competitive balance plays a positive role for male matches while it does not for female matches. As expected, later rounds (e.g., semi-finals and finals) attract more viewers. Our results persist when we regress female and male viewers separately.

These findings have important implications for future research in sports consumer behavior and sports marketing, with a particular emphasis on the demand for individual-player sports: TV-stations may alter their broadcasting strategy and include beauty measures to attract more viewers and hence more advertising, especially when foreign players are playing. On the other hand, the findings suggest that decision makers in sports marketing may include beauty measures in their analyses for potential endorsement deals. Given that most research in sports consumer behavior and sports demand focuses on team sports, our work extends the literature on individual sports demand and sheds light on the beauty premium in sports.

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