Do you think looks can affect grades? Do you think it works for both boys and girls?

Pretty Girls Make (Higher) Grades

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*LA Johnson/NPR*

Ring, ring.

Hello?

It's reality calling. People are shallow, and life isn't fair.

[In a new paper](http://pirate.shu.edu/~rotthoku/Liberty/Student%20Appearance%20and%20Academic%20Performance%20_v3.pdf), a pair of researchers looked at the student records of tens of thousands of students at their university. They compared the students' class grades to ratings of their physical attractiveness, as judged by outside observers from their student ID card photographs.

The researchers found that the women judged as least attractive earned significantly lower grades, after controlling for their ACT scores. The best-looking women earned higher grades. And male professors were more likely than female professors to give better-looking women higher grades.

But here's what the study's lead author, Rey Hernández-Julián, calls the "key finding": When these same exact students took online courses, where appearance is not an issue, the benefits of being pretty all but disappeared.

"The main results in our paper were not about whether there is a return to appearance, but whether it would be smaller in online environments, where the student is not seen," he told NPR Ed.

The study by Hernández-Julián and Christina Peters, both professors of economics, took place at Metropolitan State University of Denver, a broad-access university with a diverse student population.

A large body of social-science research already supports the advantages of being really, really good-looking.

Better-looking people tend to make more money. They are more liked and trusted by others. They marry other good-looking people who are also better educated than average.

A classic study from the 1970s showed this effect holds true in academic settings as well. Given identical course transcripts, teachers [judged prospective students](http://math.coe.uga.edu/prime/Methods/Expectations.pdf) to be more intelligent if they appeared more attractive in a photograph.

Rachel Gordon, a professor of sociology and public policy at the University of Illinois at Chicago, has published papers with similar conclusions to this latest one — although her work has shown that better-looking men, as well as women, also receive a grade premium. That wasn't the case in the Denver study.

Gordon calls this idea of comparing the same students' performance in both online and in-person courses an "interesting and clever design."

Previous studies left unclear whether people are reacting to some relevant quality that goes along with looks, or merely looks alone. Maybe students are rated unattractive because they are ill or depressed, which also tends to hurt their course performance. Or maybe good-looking students have more confidence and are more outgoing because they're good-looking, and that leads to better performance.

But if that's the case, why don't we see the same effects in online courses?

Hernández-Julián is the first to point out that the overall variation in grades on the basis of looks is small. Math class is not modeling school.

But, he says, giving all students a chance to compete academically in an arena where looks don't matter might allow more of them to shine.