

PRETTY PRIVILEGE IN THE ARMENIAN WORKFORCE: INVESTIGATING THE LABOR  
MARKET IMPACT OF PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS

by

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## Introduction

In a busy Yerevan office, a hiring manager scrolls through a series of job applicants. Two faces catch her eye, both individuals appear capable, professional, and confident. The resumes are not shown, qualifications are not reviewed. In fact, there is no other context at all. Still, a choice is made. One of the faces seems more impressive, more “hireable.” “She just looks like she belongs,” the manager thinks, marking that candidate for further consideration. This seemingly minor instinct reflects a much larger, often unspoken force at work, how physical appearance influences professional judgments, even in the absence of concrete information.

This phenomenon is commonly referred to as pretty privilege, the social and professional advantages conferred upon individuals perceived as physically attractive. Unlike qualifications, skills, or experience, these advantages are neither earned nor consciously granted, they are quietly assumed, often operating beneath awareness. Within hiring contexts, attractiveness can shape assumptions about competence, leadership, confidence, and overall professional potential. And as this project explores, those assumptions often begin with nothing more than a headshot.

While appearance-based discrimination has been the subject of various international studies, much of the existing literature focuses on Western labor markets. In these contexts, attractive individuals are consistently rated as more competent, likable, and leadership-worthy, even when qualifications are held constant (Hamermesh and Biddle, 1994; Mobius and Rosenblat, 2006). However, the cultural dynamics that shape beauty norms, gender expectations, and hiring practices vary significantly across societies. In Armenia, a transition economy where

education and professional achievement are highly valued, beauty standards continue to play an unacknowledged role in public life, including employment.

Resumes in Armenia frequently include photographs, a practice increasingly discouraged in Western hiring due to bias concerns. Professional platforms like LinkedIn are widely used, and visual presentation is often the first point of assessment in recruitment. In this visual-first environment, beauty norms are not a side issue, they are structurally embedded into the hiring process. Yet there has been almost no academic research investigating how these norms influence professional decision-making in Armenia.

This capstone seeks to address that gap. Through a structured survey experiment, Armenian working professionals were asked to evaluate real LinkedIn headshots of ten Armenian individuals, five men and five women. No resumes, bios, or contextual information were provided, only photographs. Prospective Employees rated each candidate across several dimensions, including perceived competence, professionalism, confidence, leadership potential, and overall hireability. These ratings formed the basis for identifying whether physical appearance, and specifically perceived attractiveness, silently shaped professional judgments.

The rationale for this design was to simulate a common reality in Armenian hiring practices, where visual cues are often one of the first, and sometimes only, filters in early-stage selection. By isolating the image from all other data, this method allowed the research to zero in on the influence of looks alone. To deepen the analysis, this study also incorporated a second qualitative phase, in which Prospective Employees discussed the visual cues that shaped their

judgments. Respondents were asked to reflect on what influenced their evaluations, including facial expression, posture, grooming, makeup, and clothing. These open-ended reflections helped uncover the underlying cultural and aesthetic logic behind professional judgments.

Early results from this study suggest a striking pattern, attractive individuals were consistently rated more favorably across all professional dimensions, even though their qualifications were never seen. Prospective Employees routinely rated more attractive candidates as more competent, more confident, and better suited for leadership, demonstrating the powerful role of visual bias even in the absence of supporting evidence. In some cases, respondents explicitly stated they “weren’t sure why” a person stood out, an indication that such judgments were often driven by intuition rather than conscious reasoning.

The gendered nuances of pretty privilege also came to light. Attractive men were more likely to be perceived as assertive and leadership-ready, while attractive women were often described as “polished,” “well-presented,” or “charming.” In contrast, women deemed less conventionally attractive were more likely to be labeled “dependable” or “hardworking,” pointing to differing assumptions about competence and charisma based on appearance and gender. These judgments were not only informed by appearance but by how that appearance was read, interpreted, and framed through cultural expectations around professionalism and femininity.

In later sections of this capstone, the findings are analyzed not only statistically, showing trends in how Prospective Employees rated attractiveness in relation to professional potential,

but also visually, interpreting what specific elements within each photograph contributed to higher or lower evaluations. Body language, styling, posture, camera angles, and facial expressions are examined alongside Prospective Employee quotes to understand how aesthetic cues are socially coded and professionally consequential.

By focusing on how attractiveness influences hiring decisions in Armenia, this study contributes to a broader conversation about meritocracy, fairness, and equity in the workplace. If appearance, something entirely unrelated to skill or performance, can shape professional opportunity, then the integrity of hiring practices is called into question. And if these biases are subconscious or culturally normalized, they become even harder to detect, let alone dismantle.

This project does not argue that attractive people are unqualified. Rather, it calls for greater awareness of how visual impressions, especially in visually-driven platforms like LinkedIn, influence outcomes that are supposed to be based on merit. By using real images and real professionals, and removing all other variables, this study makes the invisible visible, it exposes the aesthetic shortcuts that can shape, and skew, opportunity.

As Armenia's labor market continues to modernize and integrate global standards of equity, it is essential to recognize and name the informal factors that influence formal decisions. This research is a small but necessary step toward understanding how pretty privilege operates in Armenia, and what that means for the future of fair and inclusive professional environments.

## Literature Review

The role of physical appearance in shaping social and professional outcomes has long been of interest across disciplines including economics, psychology, and sociology. In recent years, the term pretty privilege has emerged to describe the tangible advantages granted to individuals perceived as physically attractive. While this concept is gaining visibility in public discourse, its academic investigation, especially in non-Western, post-Soviet contexts like Armenia, remains limited. This review synthesizes the theoretical foundations and empirical research related to attractiveness-based discrimination, discusses gendered and cultural variations, and identifies specific gaps that this capstone study addresses.

### *Theoretical Explanations for Attractiveness-Based Bias*

At the core of research on appearance-based labor market outcomes are three major theoretical frameworks. The first is taste-based discrimination theory, introduced by Gary Becker (1971), which posits that employers may simply prefer interacting with attractive employees, regardless of performance or productivity. These preferences may be irrational but are often persistent, reflecting the employer's personal aesthetic biases rather than objective criteria.

The second is statistical discrimination theory (Phelps, 1972, Arrow, 1973), which suggests that, in the absence of complete information about a candidate, employers may use physical appearance as a shortcut. An attractive person is assumed to be more competent, confident, or socially skilled. Although not necessarily conscious, this reasoning creates a feedback loop where appearance is used as a substitute for merit, even when no real correlation exists.

The third explanation draws on implicit bias theory, which focuses on the subconscious associations between attractiveness and positive traits such as trustworthiness, intelligence, or leadership potential (Bertrand et al., 2005). These associations often form early in life and are reinforced by media representations, social norms, and cultural conditioning. In unstructured interviews or informal hiring contexts, such biases can influence decisions invisibly, making them difficult to identify and even harder to challenge.

Together, these models explain how aesthetic preferences can function as unacknowledged yet systematic forms of labor market discrimination, rewarding beauty in ways unrelated to actual ability or job performance.

#### *Empirical Evidence: The Beauty Premium*

A growing body of empirical research confirms that attractive individuals enjoy material and professional benefits. Hamermesh and Biddle's (1994) landmark study found that attractive workers earned between 5 and 10 percent more than their less attractive peers in the United States, even after accounting for variables such as education and experience. Mobius and Rosenblat (2006) further demonstrated that attractive people were seen as more intelligent and trustworthy, even when respondents had no knowledge of their qualifications.

Studies from Australia and Europe have echoed these findings. Borland and Leigh (2014) showed that attractive workers in Australia were not only better paid, but were also viewed as more promotable. Gehrsitz (2014) found that attractive men in Germany were significantly more

likely to be employed, suggesting that beauty bias influences not just wages, but labor market participation itself. Interestingly, some studies suggest that these advantages may not be distributed equally across genders. Men often benefit more consistently from attractiveness, while women may be rewarded in some contexts and penalized in others, depending on how their appearance interacts with social expectations around femininity and professionalism (Heilman and Stopeck, 1985).

Taken together, these findings highlight that attractiveness operates as a proxy for traits such as intelligence, charisma, and competence, even though these traits cannot be visually confirmed. This disconnect raises critical concerns about fairness in professional evaluations.

#### *Gender and Cultural Dynamics in Beauty-Based Discrimination*

The advantages associated with attractiveness are shaped by both gender and culture. Feminist scholars have long emphasized that women's appearances are more heavily scrutinized than men's, and that beauty can simultaneously function as a source of power and constraint. For example, Kang et al. (2017) found that attractive women were more likely to be hired into entry-level or public-facing positions, but less likely to be seen as authoritative or leadership-ready. This double standard reflects contradictory expectations, women must be attractive, but not excessively so, professional, but still approachable, confident, but never arrogant.

In patriarchal or conservative societies, including many post-Soviet states, these pressures are often intensified. As Sontag (1972) argued, women experience a "double standard of aging," whereby professional value is more tightly tied to physical youthfulness. Naomi Wolf (1991)

further contended that modern beauty standards act as a form of soft control, where societal power structures reinforce the idea that a woman's value is inseparable from her appearance.

These gender norms intersect with class and cultural ideals. In Armenia, for example, beauty is not simply about facial symmetry or grooming. It is also tied to markers of urban sophistication, education, and Eurocentric features. As a result, individuals who align more closely with globalized beauty ideals, such as light skin, slim bodies, and understated style, are often perceived more favorably, particularly in professional contexts. These perceptions are not purely individual, they are shaped by collective norms and cultural scripts around who looks "qualified" or "successful."

Despite these critical insights, few empirical studies have explored how beauty bias functions in Armenia specifically. One important exception is Mavisakalyan's (2017) study, which found that attractive men in Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan had an 11.1 percentage point higher probability of being employed. However, the same effect disappeared for women once education and health were factored in. While useful, the study relied on interviewer evaluations and did not simulate real hiring conditions, nor did it explore Prospective Employees' reasoning or subjective impressions.

### *Perceived Beauty and Hiring in the Armenian Context*

Hiring practices in Armenia are often informal, shaped heavily by first impressions, personal networks, and visual cues. It remains common for resumes to include a professional headshot, and visual presentation on platforms like LinkedIn is often the first opportunity for

candidates to make an impression. In this context, beauty bias may not just be present, it may be embedded in the very structure of how hiring decisions are made.

Though academic research on this topic is limited, public discourse and local media have increasingly addressed the role of appearance in professional success. Notably, several news stories and interviews published by EVN Report and CivilNet have spotlighted the growth of Armenia's cosmetic enhancement industry. In these features, Armenian women openly discuss undergoing procedures such as rhinoplasty, dental work, and injectable fillers, often citing professional advancement as a motivating factor. These accounts suggest that aesthetic self-improvement is not simply personal, it is also strategic, part of a broader attempt to meet unspoken workplace expectations around beauty and professionalism.

This cultural environment creates implicit pressures that go beyond vanity. When success is perceived to depend not only on competence but on how “professional” one looks, physical appearance becomes a form of soft capital. Yet, to date, no academic studies in Armenia have analyzed this phenomenon using direct visual stimuli or experimental methods. There is also a lack of research that considers how hiring judgments vary across gender, age groups, or specific industries.

### *Contribution of the Present Study*

This capstone directly addresses these gaps by conducting the first Armenia-based experimental study on pretty privilege, using real LinkedIn headshots of Armenian professionals. It evaluates how working adults interpret and respond to visual cues in the absence of resumes or

background data. By isolating appearance as the only variable, this study offers a unique and focused look at the aesthetic judgments that often go unspoken, yet carry real consequences in professional settings.

Furthermore, the study introduces both quantitative analysis of Prospective Employee ratings and qualitative visual interpretation, expanding the existing literature methodologically. It does not rely on hypothetical composites or third-party ratings, but instead captures actual first impressions from Armenian professionals, grounded in real-world photographs.

By incorporating gender-based comparisons, generational attitudes, and open-ended reflections, the project moves beyond simple correlation. It explores the cognitive and cultural mechanisms through which appearance shapes professional assumptions. In doing so, it contributes both a methodological innovation and a culturally grounded perspective to broader debates about merit, equality, and professional fairness.

### **Research Questions**

This study investigates how physical attractiveness influences professional decision-making within Armenia's contemporary labor market. While previous literature has established that attractive individuals often receive unearned advantages in hiring and promotion, less is known about how these dynamics function in Armenia, where beauty norms, workplace culture, and gender expectations intersect in unique ways. The primary objective of this study is to examine whether physical appearance biases professional assessments and, if so, how this bias varies across different groups and contexts.

The **central research question** guiding this project is:

-To what extent does physical attractiveness influence hiring, promotion, and perceived competence in the Armenian labor market?

In addition, the study addresses the following specific sub-questions:

Does this bias affect men and women equally? Are both attractive men and attractive women rewarded in similar ways, or are the patterns of bias gender-specific?

How does perceived attractiveness influence the likelihood of a candidate being shortlisted, hired, or promoted, assuming equal qualifications?

Are perceptions of competence, leadership, and professionalism consistently aligned in hiring judgments, or might physical appearance lead Prospective Employees to evaluate a candidate as strong in one area but weak in another?

Are there patterns in how Prospective Employees of different genders and age groups respond to candidate attractiveness, and what do these patterns reveal about generational or cultural attitudes?

How do working professionals in Armenia rationalize or reflect on the role of appearance in hiring, and are they aware of their own potential biases?

Together, these questions allow for a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between physical attractiveness and employment opportunity, while highlighting gendered, generational, and cultural nuances in the Armenian context.

### **Methodology**

This study used a visual, survey-based experimental design to explore how physical appearance influences professional decision-making in Armenia. The objective was to isolate visual impressions from all other candidate information and determine how attractiveness alone might influence hiring-related judgments. This section outlines the rationale, image selection process, Prospective Employee recruitment, survey structure, and the follow-up focus group phase designed to gather deeper insights.

#### *Use of LinkedIn Photos*

In Armenia, it is common for job seekers to include professional photographs in their resumes and online profiles. Unlike hiring practices in many Western countries, where photos are discouraged to reduce bias, visual presentation remains a normalized and even expected part of candidate evaluation in Armenia. Professional platforms such as LinkedIn are widely used by young professionals and recruiters, often making the profile photo the first point of assessment in the recruitment process.

Given this cultural context, the study used real LinkedIn profile images of Armenian professionals. Ten headshots were selected in total, five women and five men, all appearing to be between 22 and 28 years old, which is typical for candidates applying to entry-level or early-career roles. All individuals were of Armenian ethnicity and their photos reflected standard professional presentation norms, such as neutral backgrounds, business attire, and front-facing or three-quarter profile angles.

To eliminate confounding variables, no names, resumes, job titles, or contextual information were shown to Prospective Employees. The study was specifically designed to isolate physical appearance as the sole factor shaping first impressions.

### *Survey Design and Prospective Employees*

The main survey was distributed to 100 Prospective Employees residing or working in Armenia. Respondents represented a variety of professional fields, including business, education, technology, public administration, and nonprofit sectors. The sample was intentionally diverse and included individuals of different age groups, gender identities, and cultural backgrounds, reflecting Armenia's evolving workforce.

To better understand group-level variation in responses, the survey included demographic questions related to:

Age

Gender identity

Cultural background or nationality

Years of professional experience

These categories enabled cross-sectional analysis of professional judgment across demographic variables. The diversity of responses allows the sample to be described as multicultural, reflecting both ethnic-cultural variation and diversity in generational, gendered, and professional perspectives.

Respondents were primarily between 18 and 34 years old (see Figure 1: Age Distribution), though additional representation was included from the 35–44 and 45+ age brackets. The survey included male, female, and non-binary Prospective Employees (Figure 2: Gender Breakdown), and a wide range of self-identified cultural backgrounds (Figure 3: Cultural Background/Nationality). Professional experience levels ranged from students and early-career professionals to mid-level and senior employees (Figure 4: Years of Professional Experience).

*Figure 1:*

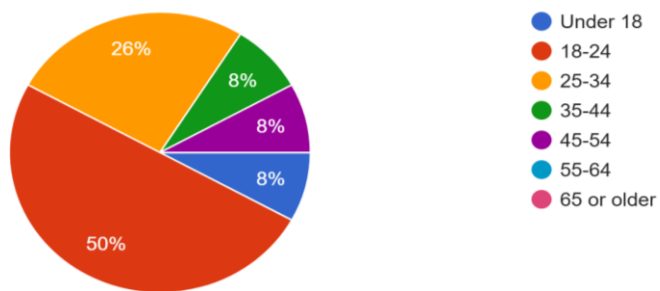


Figure 2:

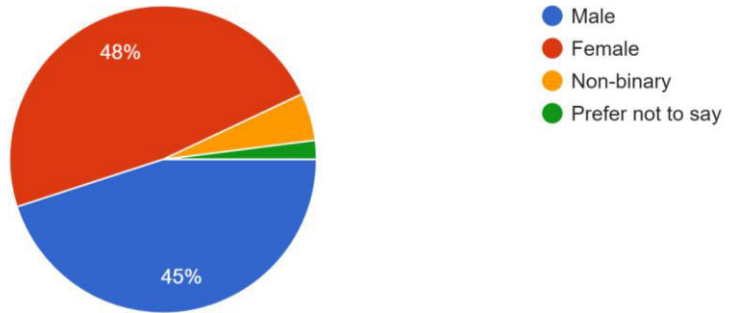


Figure 3:

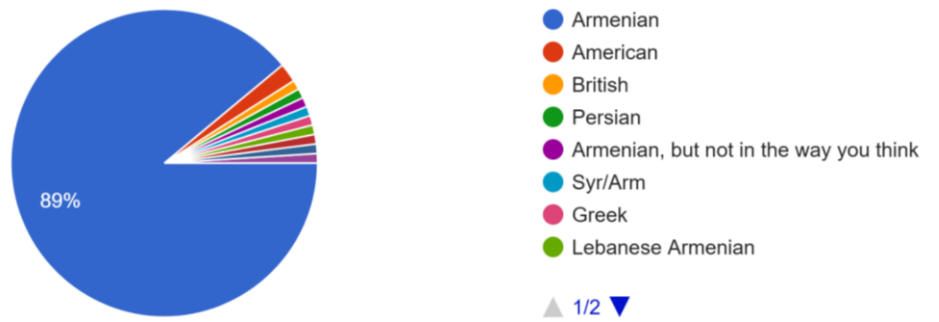
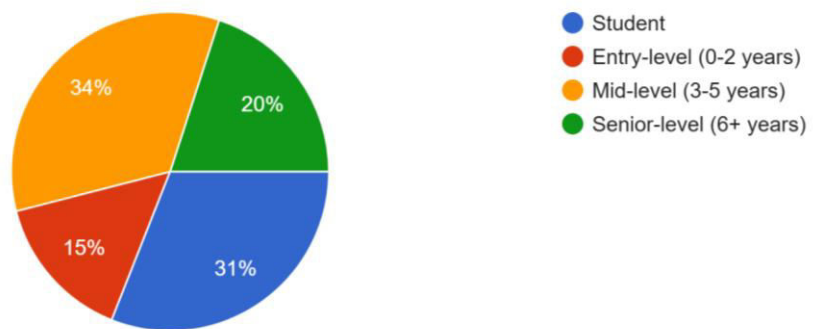


Figure 4:



The survey began with the following prompt:

“This survey is part of a research study on how first impressions impact professional opportunities. You will see images of individuals and answer questions about their hiring potential, competence, and promotion likelihood. There are no right or wrong answers, just your honest opinion.”

Each of the ten photos was presented one at a time. After viewing each image, Prospective Employees were asked to rate the individual across three key professional criteria using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Very Low, 5 = Very High):

Hiring Potential – How likely is this person to be hired for a professional role based on first impression?

Perceived Competence – How competent does this person appear?

Promotion Likelihood – How likely is this person to be seen as someone who could grow into a leadership role?

These categories were chosen to reflect distinct stages of professional progression, from initial hiring to long-term advancement. Each Prospective Employee rated all ten candidates using the same scale, producing a data set suitable for both statistical and thematic analysis.

### *Follow-Up Focus Group and Open-Ended Responses*

To enrich the findings, a second phase of data collection was conducted using a focus group questionnaire. Prospective Employees from various demographics were shown the same ten photographs and asked to answer a series of open-ended questions. This phase aimed to uncover the reasoning behind Prospective Employees' initial ratings and allowed for deeper reflection on aesthetic and professional judgments.

#### Focus group Prospective Employees were asked the following questions:

What factors influenced your ratings the most? (e.g., facial expression, clothing, age, attractiveness, perceived confidence)

Do you think personal appearance matters more for men or women in hiring? Why?

Do you believe an attractive person is automatically perceived as more competent? Why or why not?

Would your answers change if you saw their résumé or heard them speak? Why?

In your opinion, what industries or job roles are most affected by “pretty privilege” in hiring?

Responses to these questions provided critical insight into subconscious reasoning, internalized aesthetic norms, and gendered assumptions that shaped Prospective Employees' decisions. This qualitative component deepened the study's exploration of how first impressions function not only as surface-level reactions, but as culturally and socially informed judgments.

### *Ethical Considerations*

All photographs used in this study were sourced from publicly available LinkedIn profiles. Individuals featured in the study were not contacted, and no identifying information was shown to survey or focus group Prospective Employees. Prospective Employees in both phases of the research were informed about the nature of the study, assured that their answers would remain anonymous, and gave informed consent before beginning. No personal data were collected from respondents, and all participation was voluntary. The study followed ethical standards for research involving human Prospective Employees and visual media.

## **Findings**

### *Visual Semiotic and Body Language Analysis*



#### *Prospective Employee 1*

#### *Facial Expression and Gaze:*

Prospective Employee 1 presents a neutral to slightly closed facial expression. The absence of a smile or visible emotional warmth gives the impression of distance or detachment. According to Goffman (1979), neutral or impassive expressions in professional portraits may be interpreted as

a lack of enthusiasm or social openness, particularly in cultural settings where mild friendliness is considered a professional norm. Although his gaze is directed toward the camera, it lacks intensity or engagement. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue that a direct gaze typically signifies involvement and assertiveness, but in this case, the subdued eye contact may weaken the impression of confidence.

#### *Posture and Body Language:*

The Prospective Employee's posture appears slightly slouched, with rounded shoulders and a relaxed upper body. While this may communicate ease, it can also be perceived as a lack of ambition or self-assurance. His head tilts slightly downward, which in visual communication studies is often associated with passivity or deference. In professional visual culture, an upright posture is frequently interpreted as a sign of discipline, focus, and drive (Burgoon, Guerrero, and Floyd, 2016).

#### *Clothing and Grooming:*

Prospective Employee 1 is wearing a white button-down shirt, which is generally seen as clean and neutral. However, the open collar contributes to a less formal appearance. Although not inappropriate, the overall styling lacks the sharpness and structured presentation that often correlates with higher professionalism ratings. His curly hairstyle appears well-maintained, but the casual styling may come across as more expressive or social, rather than business-oriented.

#### *Background and Setting:*

The background shows a banquet-style event with soft lighting and other guests seated in the blurred distance. While not unprofessional, the setting appears more social than formal. There is no visual indicator of a business environment, such as an office or neutral backdrop, which may reduce the photo's effectiveness as a professional representation. Van Leeuwen (2005) emphasizes that background cues shape interpretations of status and role. In this case, the lack of contextual alignment may contribute to a lower impression of workplace readiness.

*Focus Group Commentary:*

Prospective Employee 1 received some of the lowest average scores across all professional categories. In focus group sessions, respondents described him as "too casual," "not confident," or "unprepared." One Prospective Employee stated:

*"He looks like he's at a dinner, not like he is applying for a serious role."*

Another added:

*"He might be a great person, but he does not look ready to lead or take initiative."*

These comments suggest that the visual impression was not shaped by attractiveness alone, but by the lack of clear professional cues. Mobius and Rosenblat (2006) emphasize that perceived confidence and grooming strongly influence hiring perceptions, sometimes even more than beauty.

Summary Interpretation:

Prospective Employee 1's image illustrates how the absence of assertive visual signals, such as strong posture, expressive gaze, and a workplace-appropriate background, can negatively affect perceptions of competence and leadership. While he is neatly dressed and appears well-groomed, the overall image conveys an impression of social informality rather than professional readiness.



*Prospective Employee 2*

Facial Expression and Gaze:

Prospective Employee 2 displays a slight smile and maintains steady, forward-facing eye contact. Her expression is relaxed and confident without appearing forced. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), a direct gaze combined with a mild smile often signals openness, approachability, and engagement. These visual qualities align with higher perceptions of both competence and hireability. In visually driven hiring environments, this combination is often associated with emotional intelligence and leadership readiness.

Posture and Body Language:

She is standing upright with even shoulders and a centered pose, projecting self-assurance and composure. Her head is slightly tilted to one side, a gesture often associated with attentiveness or warmth. According to Goffman (1979), a subtle head tilt can soften an otherwise formal pose, making the subject appear more approachable and engaged. While the portrait is cropped at mid-torso, her body language suggests balance and calm focus. This aligns with

Goffman's (1979) visual codes for professionalism, where an upright posture and squared alignment are read as indicators of control and purpose.

### *Clothing and Grooming:*

Prospective Employee 2 is wearing a grey turtleneck layered under a matching blazer. This combination conveys a sense of minimalism, discipline, and intentional styling. Her hair is straight and cleanly parted, and a small pendant necklace adds a subtle accent without distracting from the overall image. These grooming choices communicate restraint and polish, both of which contribute to perceptions of competence and leadership (Burgoon, Guerrero, and Floyd, 2016).

### *Background and Setting:*

The image is taken outdoors, with a panoramic city view under cloudy skies. While this setting adds a sense of scale and openness, it also departs from typical office or studio backdrops. As van Leeuwen (2005) notes, background environments can either reinforce or undermine intended professional cues. In this case, the setting may suggest perspective and ambition to some viewers, but to others, it may feel casual or recreational.

### *Focus Group Commentary:*

Respondents generally viewed this image as highly professional and balanced. One Prospective Employee noted:

“She looks like someone who knows how to carry herself in a work environment. No distractions, just focused.”

Another Prospective Employee offered a more cautious interpretation:

“She looks confident, but it kind of feels like she’s on vacation. I’d prefer a more office-like background for a job photo.”

This contrast illustrates how background cues can complicate otherwise strong visual impressions, particularly when professionalism is evaluated through first-glance judgments.

*Summary Interpretation:*

Prospective Employee 2’s image combines confident expression, appropriate clothing, and centered body language to produce a strong professional impression. While the outdoor setting introduced some ambiguity for a few respondents, most interpreted her demeanor and styling as clear indicators of readiness and competence. Her high ratings across all categories reflect the effectiveness of balance, directness, and visual coherence in building a positive first impression.



### *Prospective Employee 3*

#### *Facial Expression and Gaze:*

Prospective Employee 3 displays a neutral to serious facial expression, with direct but soft eye contact. His lips are closed and his expression is composed, but lacks warmth or animation. According to Goffman (1979), such expressions can be read as formal or reserved, though not necessarily disengaged. The direct gaze helps establish presence, but the lack of expressive emotion may limit approachability. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) suggest that direct eye contact accompanied by a serious expression can imply authority, but must be balanced with openness to avoid perceptions of rigidity.

#### *Posture and Body Language:*

He stands behind a podium, both hands resting at the sides of the transparent surface. His shoulders are level and his posture is upright. This positioning communicates formality and composure, aligning with conventional visual markers of political or institutional authority. While the posture is appropriate, the lack of visible movement or relaxed features may have limited the impression of flexibility or interpersonal warmth.

#### *Clothing and Grooming:*

Prospective Employee 3 is dressed in a buttoned white shirt and navy tie, paired with a lanyard and conference badge. This attire conveys formality, structure, and alignment with institutional norms. His grooming is neat, with short, tidy hair and no visible accessories beyond his official credentials. These visual choices match what Burgoon, Guerrero, and Floyd (2016)

describe as classic corporate signaling, often associated with compliance, professionalism, and clarity of role.

*Background and Setting:*

The background features European Union and American flags with a backdrop labeled “Ministry of Foreign Affairs.” This setting strongly implies international diplomacy or public service. According to van Leeuwen (2005), contextual cues like flags or government seals reinforce the viewer’s perception of authority and civic engagement. In this case, the background plays a central role in shaping interpretations of status and credibility, even if the individual’s expression is subdued.

*Focus Group Commentary:*

Prospective Employee 3 received mixed reactions from focus group Prospective Employees. One Prospective Employee commented:

“He looks like a serious government worker. I would trust him in a policy role, but I am not sure about his leadership energy.”

Another stated:

“The setting is impressive, but he looks a bit stiff. He seems competent, but not someone I would expect to speak up in a team meeting.”

These comments reflect an appreciation for the formal cues present in the image, but also a reservation about the perceived energy or interpersonal charisma.

Summary Interpretation:

Prospective Employee 3's image benefits from institutional credibility, clear visual structure, and polished attire. His posture and setting signal authority and professionalism, but his lack of expressive engagement may have limited his scores in categories related to leadership and promotion. The image presents him as trustworthy and competent, particularly in formal or public-facing sectors, but may not communicate the interpersonal dynamism some respondents associated with managerial roles. This reflects how even visually strong candidates can be rated conservatively when emotional or social signals are perceived as muted.



*Prospective Employee 4*

Facial Expression and Gaze:

Prospective Employee 4 maintains a firm, composed expression with a closed mouth and slightly raised eyebrows. His direct gaze into the camera communicates a strong sense of presence and self-assurance. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue that frontal gaze combined with neutral facial tension is often read as assertive and authoritative, particularly in professional visual culture. Although there is no visible smile, his steady expression may be interpreted as a signal of seriousness and control.

### *Posture and Body Language:*

The portrait is tightly cropped to focus primarily on the subject's face and shoulders, which limits access to full body cues. However, the symmetrical head position and squared jawline both reinforce a perception of centeredness and determination. Goffman (1979) highlights the role of face-centered framing in producing high modality impressions, particularly when subjects maintain stillness and intensity in their eye contact.

### *Clothing and Grooming:*

Prospective Employee 4 wears a white collared shirt with a slightly open top button, creating a balance between formality and approachability. His beard is neatly trimmed and his shaved head adds a bold, minimalist quality to the portrait. These grooming choices align with what Burgoon, Guerrero, and Floyd (2016) describe as signals of clarity, simplicity, and directness. The overall appearance is highly polished and controlled, which may have contributed to stronger leadership ratings.

### *Background and Setting:*

The image uses a solid digital background featuring a vivid blue circle behind the subject's head. While not a traditional professional setting, the choice of a high-contrast graphic backdrop is clean and visually engaging. Van Leeuwen (2005) notes that abstract or color-based backdrops can be effective in branding or tech-related contexts, where minimalism and clarity often replace institutional visual codes. The circular framing behind the head may also unintentionally mimic formal framing techniques used in logos or identification photos.

*Focus Group Commentary:*

Respondents generally reacted positively to Prospective Employee 4, often referencing his gaze and composure. One Prospective Employee commented:

“He looks diplomatic and serious. I can see him in a leadership or public-facing role.”

This feedback highlights the contrast between strong individual presentation and a digitally neutral setting, suggesting that context still influences the completeness of the professional impression.

*Summary Interpretation:*

Prospective Employee 4’s image conveys strength, focus, and professionalism through facial expression, grooming, and gaze. His minimalist aesthetic and direct presentation scored well with respondents who valued clarity and confidence. However, the digitally rendered background, while modern, may have introduced a sense of visual detachment for some viewers. This analysis underscores the idea that even when visual signals of leadership are present, the surrounding visual environment can still shape perceived authenticity or relatability.



### *Prospective Employee 5*

#### *Facial Expression and Gaze:*

Prospective Employee 5 presents a composed and posed smile, complemented by a direct gaze into the camera. Her facial expression is highly symmetrical and controlled, which contributes to an impression of polish. However, the intensity of makeup and visible smoothing effects may influence the perception of authenticity. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), direct gaze typically suggests engagement and confidence, but when paired with overt visual editing, it can create ambiguity around sincerity or self-presentation.

#### *Posture and Body Language:*

The image is closely framed around her face and shoulders. Her posture appears upright and deliberate, with squared shoulders and no visible tension. While this contributes to a composed visual presence, the lack of environmental context and the high level of styling may make the image feel more like a brand portrait than a professional candid.

#### *Clothing and Grooming:*

Prospective Employee 5 is dressed in a structured grey blazer and a black turtleneck, both standard symbols of executive professionalism. Her long dark hair is straightened and symmetrical, and her makeup is dramatic, particularly around the eyes and lips. The use of high-contrast contouring and bold lipstick, combined with digital smoothing, creates a flawless visual but also evokes aesthetic codes more commonly seen in influencer or beauty industry contexts.

Burgoon, Guerrero, and Floyd (2016) caution that when grooming prioritizes appearance over practicality, it can sometimes be perceived as visually impressive but professionally ambiguous.

*Background and Setting:*

The image background appears minimal and clean, possibly a white office wall with part of a leather chair visible. The controlled setting provides a formal tone, though it also reinforces the sense of artificiality, since there are no dynamic visual cues that suggest a lived work environment. Van Leeuwen (2005) emphasizes that such stripped-back compositions focus attention entirely on the subject's appearance, increasing the stakes of visual interpretation.

*Focus Group Commentary:*

Many focus group Prospective Employees raised concerns about the extent of digital editing in this photo. One respondent stated:

“I would not recognize her in real life. There is too much filter or editing going on.”

Another remarked:

“It looks very curated and artificial. More like a photoshoot than a professional headshot.”

These comments suggest that although the image is visually polished, the perceived overuse of filters and smoothing software caused doubts about authenticity. Several Prospective

Employees expressed that the image lacked transparency, which in a hiring context can be a liability, especially for roles that require trust and real-time interpersonal connection.

Summary Interpretation:

Prospective Employee 5's image is visually striking and technically polished, but the intensity of post-processing and highly stylized makeup prompted skepticism among respondents. Her attire and grooming reflect conventional corporate expectations, yet the overall aesthetic was interpreted by many as overly curated. This reaction reflects broader challenges women face in managing appearance-related expectations, where visual enhancement can be admired but also penalized. In this case, concerns about authenticity outweighed positive impressions of style, reducing ratings in categories like leadership and competence.



*Prospective Employee 6*

Facial Expression and Gaze:

Prospective Employee 6 presents a composed facial expression with a slight smile and direct eye contact. Her gaze is steady and clear, contributing to a sense of confidence without appearing overly assertive. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), this type of direct but neutral expression typically signals openness and sincerity, particularly when paired with symmetrical framing and clear lighting. While not expressive in a warm or animated way, the face projects seriousness and reliability.

Posture and Body Language:

She is standing upright with both arms crossed in front of her, a pose commonly used in professional portrait photography. The arm-crossed gesture is often intended to signal control and authority, especially in business or legal fields. However, focus group Prospective Employees noted that this specific use of the pose felt “too intentional” or “a bit forced.” As Goffman (1979) explains, overly rehearsed body language may be read as strategic rather than natural, especially when it lacks warmth or movement. In this image, the arm-crossing, while visually aligned with conventional professional codes, also creates a closed-off posture that may have limited perceptions of approachability.

#### *Clothing and Grooming:*

Prospective Employee 6 is dressed in a black blazer over a white top, accessorized with a small string of pearls and hoop earrings. Her dark hair is neatly styled, and her makeup is understated and polished. This overall presentation is formal and appropriate for a workplace setting. Burgoon, Guerrero, and Floyd (2016) argue that such minimalistic styling enhances professional credibility, particularly when it avoids distractions and reinforces the subject’s composure.

#### *Background and Setting:*

The background features horizontal blinds with diffused natural light, creating a soft and neutral atmosphere. The interior setting suggests an office or business environment, and the brightness contributes to a sense of clarity and professionalism. The framing and composition are symmetrical and deliberate, supporting the overall impression of an image crafted for

professional visibility. According to van Leeuwen (2005), environments that blend neutrality and clarity reinforce credibility by avoiding visual distractions.

Focus Group Commentary:

Focus group reactions were generally positive, but several respondents pointed out that the image felt calculated. One Prospective Employee commented:

“She looks very professional, but the crossed arms feel like a pose she was told to do. It is a bit closed off.”

Another noted:

“She looks competent and polished, but I would have liked a bit more warmth or personality.”

These reflections suggest that while the image succeeded in signaling seriousness and control, it did not fully connect on a personal or emotional level. The impression was solid but slightly reserved.

Summary Interpretation:

Prospective Employee 6 presents a clean, conventional image of professionalism, using posture, attire, and grooming to communicate competence and self-assurance. However, the use of a classic arm-crossing pose, while aligned with visual norms, was interpreted by some as

calculated or impersonal. This illustrates the tension between visual professionalism and perceived authenticity, especially in cultures where emotional warmth is expected alongside composure. Her presentation likely contributed to high ratings in competence and promotion potential, but the limited emotional expression may have softened impressions of approachability or leadership charisma.



*Prospective Employee 7*

*Facial Expression and Gaze:*

Prospective Employee 7 appears calm and lightly smiling, with a direct gaze toward the camera. His facial expression is balanced, showing slight warmth without exaggeration. This kind of expression generally signals approachability and composure, aligning with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) framework for professional gaze, which emphasizes the importance of eye contact and subtle emotional presence. Although the smile is modest, it adds a layer of friendliness that many Prospective Employees responded positively to.

*Posture and Body Language:*

He is standing upright, holding a diploma folder and dressed in a graduation cap and gown. The symmetrical framing and upright posture reflect a sense of pride and formality. Goffman (1979) identifies graduation attire as a visual symbol of transition, status, and achievement. While this attire may not fit conventional business settings, it communicates

academic accomplishment and goal completion, both of which can carry professional significance when interpreted by viewers.

#### *Clothing and Grooming:*

As expected for a graduation photo, the Prospective Employee is dressed in a cap and gown over a white shirt. This is not standard workplace attire, but within the visual culture of LinkedIn-style photography in Armenia, it still falls within accepted expressions of early-career professionalism. His grooming is tidy, with a short, well-maintained beard and no distracting accessories. According to Burgoon, Guerrero, and Floyd (2016), visual indicators of care and neatness often contribute to higher perceived competence, even when the attire is ceremonial rather than occupational.

#### *Background and Setting:*

The background includes academic banners and flags, set against a blue backdrop. These elements support the visual message of institutional recognition. Van Leeuwen (2005) argues that backgrounds loaded with symbolic content such as national or educational emblems can elevate the perceived formality and purpose of the image. However, some Prospective Employees did question whether the image was ideal for professional evaluation, given its ceremonial nature.

#### *Focus Group Commentary:*

Focus group Prospective Employees appreciated the sense of pride in the image but differed in how professionally they interpreted it. One respondent commented:

“He looks confident and like he just accomplished something important. That tells me he takes himself seriously.”

Another said:

“It is a great photo, but it feels more like a graduation memory than a professional headshot. I would expect something more neutral for hiring.”

These reflections suggest a balance between the positive impact of academic symbolism and the limitations of situational attire in conveying workplace readiness.

*Summary Interpretation:*

Prospective Employee 7's photo delivers a strong message of academic success and personal pride. His expression, posture, and grooming support impressions of competence and upward mobility. However, the graduation attire and event-based context led some viewers to interpret the image as personal rather than professional. While the visual cues did not hurt his perceived potential, they may have slightly limited perceptions of immediate hireability or leadership readiness. This case illustrates how contextually meaningful visuals, while positive, can still be read as situational rather than career-focused.



### *Prospective Employee 8*

#### *Facial Expression and Gaze:*

Prospective Employee 8 has a serious expression with a focused, slightly averted gaze. He is not looking directly into the camera, which may affect the perception of engagement or confidence. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), indirect gaze can create a sense of observation rather than connection, which sometimes weakens interpersonal resonance in visual evaluations. In this case, the serious demeanor combined with the averted eyes may be interpreted as contemplative, but also potentially distant or disconnected.

#### *Posture and Body Language:*

He stands in front of a microphone, holding a folder with both hands. His posture is slightly relaxed, with one shoulder dropped lower than the other. While his body is oriented toward an audience, his stance does not fully suggest assertiveness or control. Goffman (1979) notes that in performance or presentation contexts, body alignment and visible hand positioning can communicate leadership or authority. Here, the Prospective Employee appears to be mid-speech, which gives the image a sense of motion, but may lack the still composure associated with conventional professional portraits.

#### *Clothing and Grooming:*

He wears a dark button-down shirt and a black sweater or jacket, paired with a simple wristwatch. His beard is short and well-kept, and his hairstyle is neat. The overall look is

understated and appropriate, though less formal than other Prospective Employees. Burgoon, Guerrero, and Floyd (2016) argue that darker clothing tones often convey seriousness and focus, but when paired with casual layering, the effect may shift toward informal professionalism. His attire suits a creative or public-facing role, but may fall short of formal corporate expectations.

*Background and Setting:*

The setting appears to be an academic or professional event, with a screen projected behind him and visible technical equipment. While the context suggests expertise or involvement in a presentation, the visual composition lacks clarity. Lighting is dim, and the presence of audience heads in the foreground creates visual noise. According to van Leeuwen (2005), environments that are too busy or undefined can detract from the clarity of professional signaling, especially when they shift focus away from the subject.

*Focus Group Commentary:*

Prospective Employees were divided in how they interpreted this image. One respondent shared:

“He looks like someone giving a presentation. That is good, but I cannot really read his face or energy clearly.”

Another commented:

“It feels more like a photo taken during a moment, not something prepared to show who he is professionally.”

These perspectives highlight how contextually relevant images can still fall short when they lack intentional visual framing or facial engagement. The subject appears competent, but the image does not strongly communicate specific leadership or communication traits.

Summary Interpretation:

Prospective Employee 8’s photo reflects activity, public presence, and competence within a presentation environment. However, the lack of direct eye contact, the dim lighting, and the informal framing created a less defined professional impression for many viewers. While his attire and setting suggest meaningful engagement, the visual tone felt impromptu rather than curated. This analysis reinforces that even action-based images must still meet core visual expectations around clarity, expression, and composure to be interpreted as strong professional signals.



*Prospective Employee 9*

Facial Expression and Gaze:

Prospective Employee 9 exhibits a neutral yet confident facial expression, marked by a steady gaze directly at the camera. Her lips are closed, with a subtle upward turn that suggests calm self-assurance rather than overt friendliness. Kress and van Leeuwen

(2006) argue that a direct gaze combined with neutral facial tone often signifies authority, focus, and readiness. Her eye contact is both steady and controlled, drawing the viewer's attention and reinforcing a sense of composure.

### *Posture and Body Language:*

Her shoulders are square and upright, and the framing of the photo emphasizes symmetry. While her arms are not visible in full, the visible upper body posture suggests alertness and professionalism. Goffman (1979) emphasizes that frontal posture in portraiture, especially when evenly framed, is strongly associated with credibility and strength. Prospective Employee 9's posture reinforces a centered, grounded impression.

### *Clothing and Grooming:*

She wears a fitted black blazer over a black turtleneck, creating a unified and minimalistic look. This monochromatic style emphasizes professionalism and simplicity while allowing the focus to remain on her facial expression and gaze. Her hair is styled in soft waves, and her makeup is natural but carefully applied. The look is clean and modern, aligning with standards of executive-level presentation. According to Burgoon, Guerrero, and Floyd (2016), grooming that balances simplicity and polish contributes to perceptions of leadership and authority, particularly for women navigating visual expectations in professional environments.

### *Background and Setting:*

The background is solid and neutral, likely a light gray wall or studio backdrop. This lack of distraction helps frame the subject as intentional and focused. Van Leeuwen (2005) highlights

the importance of background neutrality in professional visuals, noting that minimal environments increase visual authority and reduce interpretive noise. The image is evenly lit, allowing clear visibility of facial features and wardrobe details.

*Focus Group Commentary:*

Prospective Employee 9 received highly favorable responses across all focus groups. One respondent noted:

“She looks like she belongs in a boardroom. Everything about her looks sharp and serious, but also approachable.”

Another added:

“Very polished and elegant. This is what I expect to see in a professional profile.”

These comments confirm the effectiveness of her visual choices in signaling high professional standards, leadership readiness, and balance between warmth and authority.

*Summary Interpretation:*

Prospective Employee 9’s photo presents a near-optimal combination of confident posture, direct gaze, minimal styling, and aesthetic balance. Her visual presentation signals competence and leadership without appearing overly staged or emotionally distant. The subdued background and clean framing allow her to visually project authority and reliability. Her high

ratings in all hiring categories reflect the strength of this image as a visual template for perceived professional success. This example illustrates how polish, confidence, and neutrality work together to form a strong first impression in a visually driven hiring culture.



*Prospective Employee 10*

*Facial Expression and Gaze:*

Prospective Employee 10 maintains a composed expression with a subtle smile and direct eye contact. Her gaze is confident and slightly narrowed, which gives the impression of poise and self-assurance. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) explain that a direct gaze paired with a faint smile often communicates engagement, clarity, and readiness. The upward tilt of her chin reinforces the impression of confidence, without appearing aggressive or distant.

*Posture and Body Language:*

The Prospective Employee is photographed in a three-quarter pose, slightly turned to the side with her shoulders angled. This classic professional portrait stance creates a flattering silhouette while maintaining visual access to her facial expression. Goffman (1979) suggests that subtle angular posture, combined with a direct gaze, can project charm and composure simultaneously. The positioning also helps balance formality with approachability.

*Clothing and Grooming:*

She is dressed in a black blazer, a conventional signal of professionalism and authority. Her hair is straight, long, and well-maintained, and her makeup is smooth and polished. The

overall styling is sleek and modern, combining elements of executive presentation with visual elegance. According to Burgoon, Guerrero, and Floyd (2016), appearance that reflects both control and grooming precision can positively influence impressions of leadership and competence, particularly when enhanced through clean symmetry.

*Background and Setting:*

The background features a blurred outdoor scene, likely with trees and a building behind her. The natural lighting and environmental blur provide visual depth without distracting from the subject. This setting, though not indoors, feels composed and intentional. Van Leeuwen (2005) notes that controlled use of natural environments can elevate the perceived clarity and freshness of an image, especially when the subject's attire and demeanor remain aligned with professional norms.

*Focus Group Commentary:*

Prospective Employee 10 received consistently high ratings across all hiring dimensions. One focus group Prospective Employee stated:

“She looks like someone who would own the room. Her gaze is strong, and she looks ready to lead.”

Another noted:

“Maybe the makeup is a little heavy, but overall she looks confident and very polished. I would definitely want to interview her.”

These remarks suggest that while certain styling choices were noticed, the overall impression leaned heavily toward positive evaluations of professionalism, confidence, and readiness for public-facing roles.

*Summary Interpretation:*

Prospective Employee 10’s photo demonstrates how visual balance, confident posture, and clean professional styling can create a powerful first impression. Her direct gaze, crisp attire, and natural yet composed background formed a cohesive image that resonated strongly with respondents. While a few viewers mentioned aesthetic intensity, this did not significantly detract from perceptions of leadership potential. The image illustrates how visual authority, when paired with subtle warmth and clarity, contributes to high evaluations in both competence and hireability.

The data collected across both survey and focus group phases reveals consistent and significant patterns in how perceived physical attractiveness affects professional judgments in Armenia. While opinions vary on the extent and fairness of this influence, the quantitative and qualitative findings leave little doubt: attractiveness impacts hiring-related decisions, often in silent but systematic ways.

*Quantitative Analysis of Survey Data*

To deepen the interpretation of Prospective Employee responses, this section presents a quantitative overview of how physical appearance influenced professional evaluations in the survey phase. Each of the ten profile photos was rated by 100 respondents across five key hiring-related dimensions: attractiveness, competence, hireability, leadership potential, and promotion likelihood. Respondents used a 5-point Likert scale, with higher values indicating more favorable assessments.

The goal of this analysis was to identify whether statistically consistent patterns emerged between perceived attractiveness and professional potential. Full average scores for all ten Prospective Employees are provided in Appendix B.

#### Clear Patterns Across Categories

The results show a consistent trend: Prospective Employees who were rated as more physically attractive were also evaluated more positively across every professional category.

For example, Prospective Employee 9, a woman frequently described in qualitative responses as “elegant,” “confident,” and “polished,” received the highest ratings in nearly every dimension. Her attractiveness score was 3.92, and her competence, hireability, leadership, and promotion scores were 3.94, 4.05, 3.77, and 3.94, respectively. These figures point to a strong perceived connection between aesthetic appeal and leadership readiness, particularly when paired with what respondents identified as a “confident gaze” and “natural professionalism.”

Similarly, Prospective Employee 10 received an attractiveness rating of 3.40 and was rated 3.86 for hireability and 3.64 for promotion. Comments about this Prospective Employee frequently cited a combination of polish and assertiveness, and respondents often noted her “sharp eye contact” and “strong presence.”

In contrast, Prospective Employee 3, whose attractiveness score was the lowest at 1.95, received some of the weakest evaluations across other categories, with a leadership rating of 2.65 and a competence rating of 2.86. Likewise, Prospective Employee 4 had similarly low ratings across the board despite a slightly higher attractiveness score of 2.59.

This general pattern supports the broader literature that attractiveness often serves as a visual heuristic for other traits such as competence, intelligence, and professionalism (Hamermesh and Biddle, 1994; Mobius and Rosenblat, 2006). In Armenia, where visual presentation is structurally embedded into the hiring process, these shortcuts appear particularly influential.

### Subtle Variations and Exceptions

Although the attractiveness-professionalism link is strong overall, the data reveal a few notable exceptions that complicate this relationship.

For instance, Prospective Employee 6 had an attractiveness score of 2.80, which was relatively modest, yet received some of the highest marks in competence (3.49) and promotion likelihood (3.51). These findings suggest that while attractiveness plays a powerful role,

Prospective Employees also responded favorably to other visual cues, such as confident posture, natural grooming, and appropriate attire.

Conversely, Prospective Employee 5 had an attractiveness rating of 2.81, nearly identical to Prospective Employee 6, but was described in focus groups as having a “filtered” or “over-edited” look. Although her competence and hireability scores were relatively high (3.46 and 3.57, respectively), her leadership rating was slightly lower (3.42), perhaps reflecting hesitations about her professional authenticity.

These subtleties indicate that perceived professionalism may not rely solely on attractiveness, but also on how attractiveness is visually packaged, through grooming, styling, and presentation choices that convey credibility and approachability.

### Attractiveness and Leadership Potential

The connection between attractiveness and leadership was particularly striking. The three Prospective Employees with the highest attractiveness ratings, Prospective Employees 9, 10, and 2, all received leadership scores of 3.77, 3.45, and 3.51, respectively, compared to 2.53 and 2.65 for Prospective Employees 4 and 3.

This supports prior research findings that physical attractiveness correlates with assumptions of competence and leadership, particularly in the absence of objective performance data (Mobius and Rosenblat, 2006). However, as later visual and qualitative analysis will show, attractiveness alone was not always sufficient. Prospective Employees were also assessing subtle

visual signals such as direct gaze, posture, and grooming, all of which shaped perceptions of authority and leadership readiness.

### Professional Implications of the Quantitative Patterns

What these averages demonstrate is that even when no background information was provided, Armenian respondents consistently associated certain visual features, especially attractiveness, with increased professional opportunity. This pattern was especially visible in the hireability and promotion categories, which reflect the first and final stages of professional advancement.

In contexts like Armenia, where resumes frequently include headshots and visual presentation plays a visible role in early-stage screening, this form of visual bias has far-reaching implications. As discussed in the literature review, these impressions are not simply personal preferences. They represent a deeper structural pattern of aesthetic expectations that can advantage some and exclude others before any credentials are even considered.

By identifying these trends numerically, and referencing the full set of averages in Appendix B, this section establishes the quantitative basis for deeper visual and narrative interpretations that follow in the next sections of the Findings.

### *General Trends Across 100 Survey Respondents*

Across the initial survey involving 100 Armenian Prospective Employees, each of the 10 LinkedIn profile photos (5 male, 5 female) was rated on four dimensions:

Likelihood of receiving a job interview

Likelihood of being hired for a leadership position

Likelihood of receiving faster promotions

Perceived competence

All candidates had no accompanying resumes, bios, or background information, only their photos were presented. This allowed the study to isolate and measure the impact of visual first impressions alone.

### *Strong Correlation Between Attractiveness and Professional Advantage*

One of the most revealing trends in the data is how visual confidence, grooming, and perceived authenticity shaped perceptions of professional potential, even more than conventional beauty alone.

Prospective Employee 9, a woman described as “clean,” “elegant,” and “serious”, received consistently high scores across all four hiring-related dimensions. Multiple respondents noted her

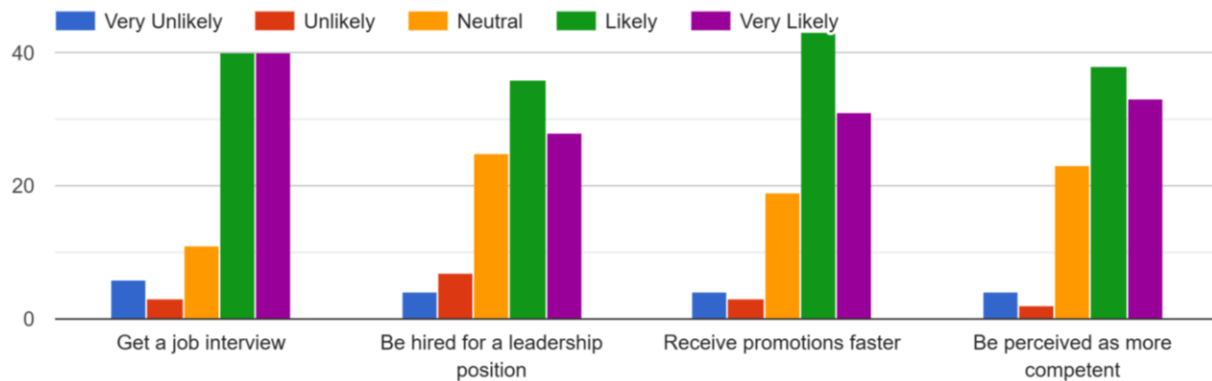


confident appearance, poised posture, and subtle professionalism. Her image was praised as sharp, stylish, and competent without being overdone.

“Carries herself with class.”

“Could easily hold her own in a boardroom.”

“Professional and clean. Looks sharp and serious, not trying too hard.”



In contrast, Prospective Employee 5, also a woman, had one of the lowest rating averages across leadership, promotion, and competence categories. Her photo appeared heavily filtered and stylized, which many Prospective Employees cited as a drawback. Even though she fits many standards of beauty, her edited image led to skepticism

about authenticity and professionalism.

“Too much filter, not professional.”

“She’s trying more for Instagram than for a job.”

“I wouldn’t recognize her in real life.”

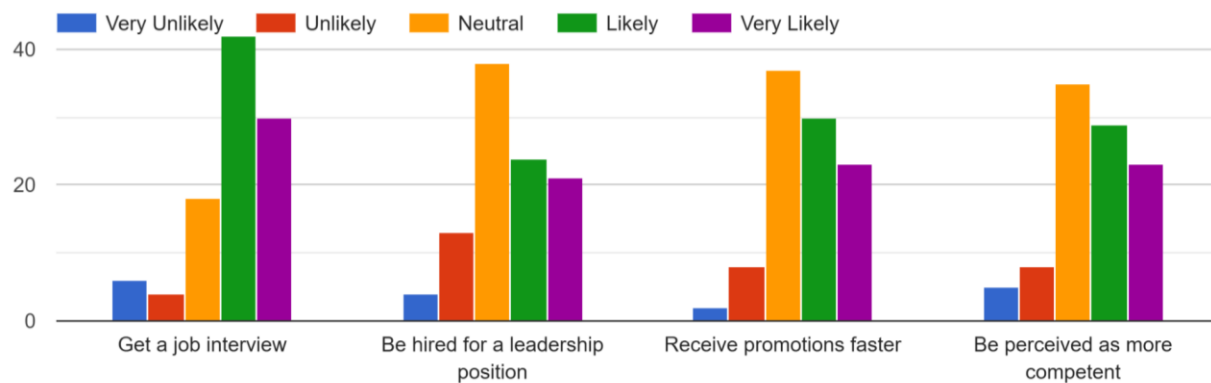


Meanwhile, Prospective Employee 10, a woman with a confident expression and polished look, received among the highest scores overall. Her image struck a balance between approachability and assertiveness. The photo looked professional but natural, without heavy editing or theatrical presentation.

“Sharp, clean, strong eye contact. Comes across as assertive and capable.”

“Confident, experienced, and ready.”

“This woman looks like she runs the room.”



These examples underscore a key insight from this study: while attractiveness plays a role, it’s often confidence, professionalism, and authenticity, as perceived visually, that strongly influence

hiring-related impressions. A well-groomed, poised candidate with subtle confidence outperformed others, even when beauty alone was not emphasized.

### Gendered Patterns and Bias

One of the most revealing patterns in the data was how attractiveness interacted with gendered expectations.



Attractive men were consistently associated with leadership potential. Their appearance was interpreted as a sign of assertiveness, seriousness, and capability. Prospective

Employee 7 and Prospective Employee 4

(another male with a direct gaze and formal attire) were both viewed as strong candidates for leadership roles and competence, even without context.



Attractive women, however, received more conflicting evaluations. While Prospective Employee 9 and Prospective Employee 10 received high ratings for “getting a job interview” and “competence,” some focus group comments questioned their seriousness or whether their attractiveness might be “too much” for leadership.

For example, a comment about Prospective Employee 10 read:

“She’s clearly well-groomed and presentable, but the makeup is a bit too much, it feels more like she’s going to a photoshoot, not a board meeting.”

These double standards suggest that attractive women may benefit from initial opportunities (such as interviews), but are sometimes viewed as less competent or less authoritative, unless they perfectly balance appearance with visible professionalism.

### *Focus Group Phase: Age and Gender-Specific Insights*

In the second phase, 20 Armenian Prospective Employees across four demographic groups (F18–34, F35+, M18–34, M35+) evaluated the same images. They completed the same Likert-scale evaluations and provided open-ended feedback, revealing deeper attitudes and rationalizations.

#### Focus Group 1: Women Aged 18–34 (F18–34)

This group showed strong awareness of how confidence and grooming shaped their perceptions. Many expressed admiration for candidates who "looked the part" without trying too hard. For example, Prospective Employee 9 again stood out:

“She looks very professional and smart... I’d totally see her succeeding.”

Several Prospective Employees acknowledged that even subtle cues like posture, eye contact, or formal clothing influenced their judgments. Yet, many admitted their opinions would

change if they saw resumes or heard the candidates speak, indicating a tension between visual bias and deeper evaluation.

**Common response themes:**

1. Confidence is crucial,
2. Filtered or overly styled images reduce credibility,
3. Women are judged more harshly on appearance.

Facial expression age and confidence

looks very professional and smart

Perceived confidence

Overall

The picture looks professional so the first impressions are high

Focus Group 2: Women Aged 35+ (F35+)

The F35+ group offered the most critical evaluations of both men and women. This group emphasized professionalism, maturity, and authenticity over trendiness or fashion. For instance, Prospective Employee 1 was rated poorly for looking “too young,” while Prospective Employee 4 and Prospective Employee 7 (displayed above) were praised for a “diplomatic, sharp look.”



One quote about the Prospective Employee 4 summarized their stance:

“This is the kind of person you want representing the country. Formal, diplomatic setting, proper attire.”

Their responses underscore the generational expectations of what professional success “should look like.” These Prospective Employees often mentioned how first impressions are gendered, yet also age-coded, especially for women.

### Focus Group 3: Men Aged 18–34 (M18–34)

This group offered blunt and revealing commentary about how appearance, especially for women, shapes hiring decisions. While some tried to remain objective, many admitted that attractive candidates “seem more confident” and “get to places faster.”

A Prospective Employee said:

“Unfortunately, handsome people have more chances to get to places.”

Notably, this group also highlighted appearance expectations for women:

“Women are especially judged in Armenia. You can tell from how they’re expected to look put together even in basic roles.”



Prospective Employee 5 (female) received strong criticism for filters and facial fillers, illustrating how over-styling can backfire, especially when judged by younger men.

#### Focus Group 4: Men Aged 35+ (M35+)

The older male group expressed a realistic but critical view of appearance-based bias. While several denied hiring based on looks alone, they acknowledged that attractive people get treated better, especially in early interviews or public-facing roles.

One of the strongest quotes came from this group:

“Let’s not pretend the world is fair. A well-dressed, attractive woman will almost always get more attention in interviews.”

Interestingly, they rated attractive male candidates like Prospective Employee 4 as strong leaders and future managers. But attractive women were more often praised for their “style” or “polished looks” than competence.

#### *Visual-Driven Patterns and Contrasts*

When comparing visual data across all groups:

Top 2 highest rated overall had similar features: clean styling, direct eye contact, and confident postures.

Lowest rated Prospective Employees (Prospective Employees 1 and 3) either appeared too young, casual, or inauthentic.



### **Summary of Key Findings**

Attractiveness strongly correlates with perceived hireability, leadership, and competence. Attractive men are often seen as leaders, while attractive women are seen as presentable, but must work harder to be seen as authoritative. Facial expression, grooming, and posture are cited as key indicators of perceived professionalism. Filters, youth, or informal photos significantly lowered evaluations. Generational differences exist: Older Prospective Employees prefer conservative professionalism, while younger ones favor charisma and digital fluency.

All four groups acknowledged that appearance influences hiring, even when they tried to remain objective.

The results of this study present compelling evidence that visual appearance significantly impacts perceptions of professional potential in Armenia’s job market. Across both the large-scale survey (100 respondents) and follow-up focus group discussions (20 Prospective Employees), clear patterns emerged regarding how attractiveness, grooming, facial expression, and perceived confidence influenced assumptions about competence, hireability, and promotability.

Prospective Employees who were rated as more attractive generally scored higher across all hiring-related categories, especially in initial interview likelihood and promotion potential. However, attractiveness alone was not enough. Images that appeared heavily filtered, overly edited, or lacking in authenticity received lower marks despite fitting conventional beauty norms. Prospective Employees often commented negatively on these images, citing concerns such as “too much filter,” “not a professional look,” or “more like an influencer than a leader.”

Conversely, respondents consistently rewarded those who projected natural confidence, professional grooming, and an approachable yet assertive demeanor. These visual signals of readiness were consistently associated with leadership potential and perceived competence.

The gendered nature of appearance judgments also became evident. All four focus groups (F18–34, F35+, M18–34, M35+) agreed that women experience greater scrutiny based on looks, particularly in hiring. Prospective Employees noted that women are expected to appear “polished” even in roles where appearance shouldn’t matter. Some male respondents openly

acknowledged that attractive women may receive more attention in interviews, especially from male executives, highlighting a deeper systemic bias.

Furthermore, Prospective Employees regularly admitted that their judgments would likely change if they had access to resumes or heard the candidates speak. This indicates that appearance primarily affects first impressions, and while it may open (or close) the door, it doesn't necessarily determine long-term professional evaluations.

Industries identified as most impacted by “pretty privilege” included:

Customer-facing roles (sales, hospitality, front desk)

Public relations and marketing

Media and entertainment

Administrative support (e.g., secretaries, assistants)

Fashion and beauty sectors

Finally, while both men and women were judged based on appearance, women faced more detailed aesthetic expectations. For men, confidence, grooming, and presence mattered most. For women, it was a complex mix of beauty, polish, professionalism, and appropriateness, making the standard more demanding and contradictory.

### **Conclusion and Future Research Directions**

This capstone set out to examine how physical appearance influences perceptions of professional potential within Armenia's labor market. By isolating photographs from all other

candidate information, the research demonstrated that first impressions are not only shaped by grooming and confidence but are also heavily influenced by conventional standards of attractiveness. These impressions, often formed within seconds, had measurable effects on how likely individuals were perceived to be hired, promoted, or trusted as competent professionals.

Across a large survey and four focus groups, Prospective Employees consistently rated more attractive individuals as more capable. However, this effect was not universal. When photos appeared overly filtered, staged, or lacking in authenticity, perceived competence suffered. This nuance reinforces the idea that "pretty privilege" is not just about being conventionally good-looking, it is about embodying an aesthetic ideal that communicates confidence, credibility, and professionalism within a specific cultural context.

The study also highlighted distinct gendered and generational biases. Attractive men were largely rewarded with assumptions of leadership and strength, while attractive women had to balance professionalism with approachability to avoid being dismissed as superficial. Focus group comments revealed that women face significantly more complex aesthetic expectations, and that their appearance is often seen as central to their hireability, even for non-appearance-based roles. Younger Prospective Employees leaned more heavily on charisma and confidence, while older Prospective Employees emphasized formality, conservative dress, and maturity. These dynamics reflect broader cultural and societal expectations in Armenia, particularly around gender roles and professionalism.

This research contributes to the existing literature by offering empirical, Armenia-specific data on how attractiveness influences professional outcomes. Unlike prior studies that relied on hypothetical profiles or third-party ratings, this capstone used real images and sought responses from working professionals in Armenia. The insights gained reveal how informal visual impressions have become embedded within formal hiring processes, especially in a culture that encourages resumes with photos and emphasizes public presentation on platforms like LinkedIn.

### *Recommendations for Practice*

#### For employers and HR professionals:

Acknowledge visual bias as a real and measurable force. Develop internal processes, like blind resume screening or structured interviews, to reduce first-impression bias.

Provide training on implicit bias, including aesthetic and gender bias, to foster fairer and more inclusive hiring environments.

#### For job seekers:

Understand that first impressions still matter, particularly in Armenia's photo-first professional culture.

While avoiding over-editing or artificial presentation, candidates should aim for confident, clean, and professional profile photos that balance approachability with credibility.

For educators and professional development programs:

Incorporate media literacy and professional presentation modules into career counseling services.

Address the role of aesthetics in hiring honestly with young professionals, helping them navigate both opportunity and bias.

Future Research Directions

This capstone opens several avenues for future investigation:

**Resume vs. Image Interplay:** Future studies could present the same photographs paired with resumes to determine how visual impressions interact with academic and professional credentials. Does a highly qualified unattractive candidate still get overlooked?

**Hiring Manager vs. Peer Comparison:** Are hiring professionals more or less influenced by attractiveness than general workers? Segmenting responses by role could reveal whether bias increases or decreases with seniority.

Industry-Specific Studies: Given that pretty privilege was most cited in customer-facing sectors, future research could isolate particular industries (e.g., tech vs. PR vs. hospitality) to identify sector-based variations in appearance-related bias.

Longitudinal Studies: How do appearance-based biases play out over time? Tracking employee success, retention, and promotion in real-life settings could further validate the findings from this study.

Intersectional Analysis: How do appearance biases intersect with race, class, disability, and sexuality in Armenia? This capstone focused on gender and generational splits, but deeper intersectional work is needed to uncover the full scope of this issue.

Comparative Regional Studies: As Armenia continues integrating global hiring norms, comparative studies with neighboring countries or diasporan communities could help map how universal or culturally unique these dynamics are.

Ultimately, this research calls for a more critical and transparent dialogue around beauty, professionalism, and fairness in employment. If appearance continues to shape opportunities in subtle but systemic ways, then our collective understanding of merit must expand to include, and challenge, the silent weight of first impressions.

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#### Appendix A: Prospective Employee Photo Set.

The following images were shown to Prospective Employees during the survey and focus group phases of this study. No identifying information was provided. Prospective Employees evaluated these photos based solely on visual impressions across professional dimensions such as competence, hireability, and leadership potential.



*Prospective Employee 1*



*Prospective Employee 2*



*Prospective Employee 3*



*Prospective Employee 4*



*Prospective Employee 5*



*Prospective Employee 6*



*Prospective Employee 7*



*Prospective Employee 8*

	<p><i>Prospective Employee 9</i></p>
	<p><i>Prospective Employee 10</i></p>

Appendix B: Average Prospective Employee Ratings Across Hiring Categories

The table below presents the average scores assigned by 100 survey respondents to each of the ten LinkedIn-style profile photos shown during the study. Prospective Employees rated each individual on a 5-point Likert scale across five dimensions: perceived attractiveness, competence, hireability, leadership potential, and promotion likelihood. These averages provide

a numerical foundation for the statistical and visual analysis discussed in the Findings section.

Higher scores indicate stronger positive impressions in the respective category.

Prospective Employee	Attractiveness	Competence	Hireability	Leadership	Promotion
Prospective Employee 1	2.75	2.98	3.14	2.50	2.81
Prospective Employee 2	3.19	3.5	3.87	3.51	3.55
Prospective Employee 3	1.95	2.86	3.15	2.65	2.97
Prospective Employee 4	2.59	2.79	2.88	2.53	2.64
Prospective Employee 5	2.81	3.46	3.57	3.42	3.47
Prospective Employee 6	2.80	3.49	3.72	3.46	3.51
Prospective Employee 7	2.41	3.2	3.44	3.13	3.24
Prospective Employee 8	2.19	2.9	3.15	2.86	2.93

Prospective Employee 9	3.92	3.94	4.05	3.77	3.94
Prospective Employee 10	3.40	3.57	3.86	3.45	3.64