



Face and fortune: Inferences of personality from Managing Partners' faces predict their law firms' financial success

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ABSTRACT

First impressions can predict numerous subjective and objective outcomes. Here we show that judgments of the faces of the Managing Partners (MPs) of America's top 100 law firms relate to their firms' success. Participants' ratings of Power (competence, dominance, and facial maturity) from the MPs' faces significantly correlated with the profit margin, profitability index, and profits per equity partner (PPP) that the firms earned. Participants' ratings of Warmth (likeability and trustworthiness) showed no relationship with these variables, however. These effects remained after controlling for important factors, such as facial attractiveness, MP years of experience, photo quality, and firm size, as measured by number of lawyers. Based on previous research and leadership theory, traits related to leadership may therefore become manifest in individuals' faces, influencing the performance of the organizations that they lead.

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Nonverbal behavior and appearance communicate important information about individuals (e.g., Zebrowitz, 1997). So strong are these cues, that our quick, first impression judgments of others can be surprisingly predictive of others' behavior. For example, judgments of teachers from brief video clips can predict how they are evaluated both by their students and their supervisors (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993). In this case, brief judgments (in just a few seconds) significantly corresponded to longer judgments (across the entire semester).

But recent work has shown that the validity of such “thin slice” judgments need not rely on outcomes that are subjective, or context-dependent. That is, participants judging video clips of teachers in a laboratory may base their evaluations on the same cues from appearance and behavior that the teachers' actual students do when in the class. However, in some domains, perceptions in the laboratory can predict outcomes that are not ostensibly related to the targets' behaviors or appearances.

Rule and Ambady (2008) showed that judgments of photographs of the faces of Fortune 1000 Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) related to their success. Ratings of personality traits and leadership by naive college undergraduates significantly related to how much profit each CEO's company made. From the perspective of Calder's (1977) attribution theory of leadership, it might be supposed that perceivers were able to detect subtle, distinctive differences in the appearances of the CEOs that led them to attribute higher leadership abilities to some CEOs over others (see also Funder, 1995). These brief snap judgments of the CEOs' faces, however, led to inferences that might be considered accurate, insofar as they were significantly related to an objective measure of the CEOs' success: their organizations' financial performance. Thus, there would appear to have been something distinct about the CEOs' faces that reflected the performance of the groups they led.

It is a surprising finding that judgments of CEOs' faces should reflect their companies' success, as there is no immediate explanation for why CEOs' appearance should influence their organizations' performance. Delving deeper, however, social psychological theory may be able to provide some explanation for this effect. As reviewed above, facial appearance can exert an

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important influence on an individual's outcomes. The “kernel of truth” hypothesis suggests that appearances can convey information about underlying traits and dispositions (e.g., [Berry, 1990](#)). Similarly, the Gibsonian approach to social perception ([Gibson, 1979](#)) would suggest that there is inherent utility in our perceptions of others' faces that guides our behaviors and reactions to them (see [Zebrowitz & Collins, 1997](#)). This applied notion of face perception may be particularly useful when considering the appearance of leaders. Observation of the *zeitgeber* phenomenon suggests that individuals can influence the behaviors of others via nonverbal cues ([Bernieri & Rosenthal, 1991](#); [Bluedorn & Jaussi, 2008](#)). Consistent with [Kaiser, Hogan, and Craig's \(2008\)](#) review of leadership, particular individuals who “stand out” may be recognized as leaders, treated as leaders, and therefore command a following. It is unclear, however, whether this effect is the product of the individual, the environment, or both.

Inherent differences in appearance may permit some individuals to be attributed leadership qualities over others. The observation of naturally emergent leadership and status hierarchies among non-human animals suggests that there may be some evolutionary or biological component underlying the nonverbal expression of leadership ability (see [Mazur, 2005](#)). One particularly relevant component may be the expression of dominance, which plays an important role in establishing status hierarchies among primates (e.g., [Mazur, 2005](#)). Interestingly, in two previous studies, CEOs who looked more dominant and powerful were associated with companies that earned more profits ([Rule & Ambady, 2008](#)) and individual compensation ([Rule & Ambady, 2009](#)). One explanation for this could be that CEOs who look like better leaders or who look more dominant might be hired by more successful companies. Previous work would support the link between inherent aspects of facial appearance and success. For instance, teachers' judgments of children's facial attractiveness affect their progress in school ([Clifford & Walster, 1973](#)). Similarly, [Collins and Zebrowitz \(1995\)](#) found that individuals' facial appearances affected their job opportunities and their levels of success within particular jobs (see also [Stevenage & McKay, 1999](#)).

Acquired differences in appearance could also be responsible for these effects. For instance, CEOs who are more successful in climbing the corporate ladder may develop an appearance that reflects their effort. Indeed, previous work has shown that life experiences can subtly alter facial appearance. In one study, [Zajonc, Adelman, Murphy, and Niedenthal \(1987\)](#) reported that pairs of spouses converged in appearance over time. The specific mechanism in this instance is believed to be chronic facial mimicry and mirroring of one another's behaviors. For example, smiling and laughing with a particular style can lead to the accentuation of facial muscles in a specific fashion. Repetition of such movements over time may lead to the development of a distinct muscular tone that reflects these movements, as well as wrinkling of the skin (e.g., [Malatesta, Fiore, & Messina, 1987](#)). Thus, leaders who express themselves in a particular way may over time develop facial appearances that reflect those expressions. The successful negotiation of groups and organizations through leadership could therefore be associated with a particular nonverbal style that is represented in the face over time.

Similar effects have been reported between individuals' personalities and their facial appearance ([Zebrowitz, Collins, & Dutta, 1998](#); see also [Zebrowitz, Voinescu, & Collins, 1996](#)), a phenomenon called the “Dorian Gray effect.” Tensing facial muscles in particular ways can affect jaw development and subsequent facial appearance ([Kreiborg, Jensen, Moller, & Bjork, 1978](#)) and people who are often angry can develop facial appearances such that over time they come to look angry even when exhibiting a neutral expression ([Malatesta et al., 1987](#)). Such effects can be linked to specific behaviors: for example, [Zebrowitz et al. \(1998\)](#) found that women with more attractive personalities in their youth were more physically attractive as adults; an effect that was related to the women's grooming behaviors.

The inherent differences explanation would presume that successful CEOs do not necessarily possess the traits of power and good leadership but that they simply look the part. In their review, [Kaiser et al. \(2008\)](#) discuss how individuals skilled in impression management often advance above competitors who are actually skilled leaders; inherent appearance could play a role in this. Indeed, even among experienced leaders and selection committees, it is possible that aspects of appearance (such as attractiveness; see [Calder, 1977](#)) may serve as surrogates for inferences of leadership, allowing relatively unqualified individuals to advance. Previous ambiguity in the literature about the importance of the CEO to a company's performance may also lend some support to such a possibility, given that some CEOs may be legitimately skilled leaders whereas others may simply be good faces for their companies (e.g., [Agle, Nagarajan, Sonnenfeld, & Srinivasan, 2006](#)). [Ranft, Zinko, Ferris, and Buckley \(2006\)](#) discussed how increased media attention has donned many CEOs with a celebrity status, making them the public face of the organizations for which they work. CEOs' appearances and the attributions made to them may therefore reflect upon their companies. Under such conditions, CEOs who “look the part” may be especially valuable and more successful companies may be able to hire CEOs who look like better leaders by way of their advantaged status and financial resources. The explanation of the relationship between perceptions of power and leadership with company profits therefore may not be that the leader predicts the accrual of profits but that the accrual of profits predicts who is chosen as the leader.

In contrast, if the look of leadership is the consequence of experience, individuals who are able to climb their way to the top of an organization would be endowed with a particular set of traits that permit their success. Over time, these traits may become expressed in their appearance, in a Dorian Gray type effect (see [Zebrowitz et al., 1998](#)). This set of traits need not be inherently present but could be a product of experiences and learning how to be a good leader that may lead to looking like a good leader. For company CEOs, there is no minimum requirement for candidacy. Indeed, American culture is characterized by stories of individuals who have worked their way to positions of success in business from the most humble beginnings (see [Gladwell, 2008](#)). Thus, it is possible, even if unlikely, that individuals without inherent ability might be able to secure positions of leadership in business based solely on their appearance and the advantages that their appearance affords them. This is not true of all domains, however, and so we conducted the present investigation to examine the relationship between facial appearance and success in a domain that necessitates a high baseline level of ability: leadership in law firms.

Unlike many companies, law firms have a distinct management structure (Galanter & Palay, 1991). Whereas most companies hire executives from across organizations, law firms function in a more tenure-like fashion. The Managing Partner (MP) of a law firm is perhaps the best equivalent to a company's CEO. Unlike CEOs, however, MPs rarely find their positions through external hires. More often, MPs advance through the ranks of the law firm and acquire their positions by vertical promotion associated with performance. MPs thus have the base set of skills and legal training required to first get hired at a particular firm and to later be successful in the work performed at the lower ranks. Thus, much of the MP's work in his or her early days is not related to leadership, but to the performance of legal tasks.

Given the hierarchical structure of the law firm, then, it stands to reason that the selection of MPs may differ from that typical for CEOs. If naive judgments of personality from the photos of the MPs of law firms were to predict their firms' success, it may serve as an indication that the relationship between first impression judgments and leadership ability, as observed for Fortune 1000 CEOs (Rule & Ambady, 2008), is more likely to be the consequence of experience rather than innate aspects of appearance. To test this, here we examined the relationship between naive judgments of personality traits from the photos of faces of MPs from America's top 100 law firms. We investigated the relationship between naive trait judgments and organization performance in the novel domain of law firms in a large cohort of targets—all 100 MPs from the American Lawyer's AmLaw 100: 2007.

Whether the look of leadership is innate, acquired, or an interaction of the two, the inferential process relies on attributions made by perceivers. Following Calder's (1977) attribution theory of leadership, nonverbal signals from individuals' appearances may signal their capacity as leaders, precipitating the attribution of leadership ability based on agreement between perceivers' trait inferences and their implicit theories of leadership. If so, the previous work showing only weak or absent relationships between leaders' traits and indices of their organizations' success (e.g., Agle et al., 2006) may have been due to obfuscation of these signals due to interfering knowledge. That is, if evaluators are well-informed about the identities and behaviors of leaders – as supervisors, subordinates, and peers often are – their assessments of individuals' leadership abilities may be colored by their personal perspectives in relation to the leader (see Kaiser et al., 2008). Indeed, as these three, often solicited, sources of information tend to show low agreement (Kaiser et al., 2008), naive judgments may prove more informative for extracting an unbiased signal from the leaders' nonverbal and appearance-based manifestations of leadership ability (see also Rule & Ambady, 2008).

We therefore employed naive (university student) perceivers to make trait judgments of the MPs in the current study. As in Rule and Ambady's (2008, 2009) examinations of the relationship between CEOs' facial appearances and their companies' success, participants provided ratings of both power-related traits (competence, dominance, and facial maturity) and warmth-related traits (likeability and trustworthiness). Consistent with this and other work (e.g., Kaplan, Klebanov, & Sorensen, 2008), we predicted that inferences of power-related traits would predict the success of MPs' firms, as measured by firm profits, whereas warmth-related traits would not. Specifically, we hypothesized that MPs who “stood out” (Kaiser et al., 2008) as more powerful would lead firms that earned more profit.

1. Method

1.1. Participants

Undergraduates participated in exchange for partial credit in an introductory psychology course ($N = 36$; $n = 25$ females). No participants reported recognizing any faces in the experiment; hence, all participants were naive raters.

1.2. Stimuli

Headshot photographs of the Managing Partners (MPs) of each of the firms from the American Lawyer's top 100 firms for 2007 were downloaded from their firms' websites. Photos for 8 of the firms' leaders could not be retrieved, for a total of 92 targets. Each photograph was standardized by cropping the image to the extremes of the head: the top of the hair, the bottom of the chin, and the limits of the ears or hair. Thus, no clothing was visible in any of the photographs. In addition, each photo was converted to grayscale and standardized in size. To control for differences in photo quality (e.g., perhaps more profitable firms hire better photographers), three blind research assistants coded each face on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (“Very low quality”) to 7 (“Very high quality”); inter-rater reliability: Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$. The mean photo quality score was averaged across raters for each target and included as a covariate in the analyses below.

Information about each MP's firm was acquired from American Lawyer's AmLaw 2007 listing of America's top 100 law firms. The AmLaw 100 listing provided information about firm revenues, profit margin, profitability index, profits per equity partner (PPP), and the number of lawyers in each firm, among other variables. Of these, we were principally interested in measures of profits and revenues for use as dependent variables.

1.3. Procedure

The experiment consisted of five blocks. In each block, participants saw all 92 faces presented in random order. The order of the blocks was random and each block consisted of a different trait judgment: competence, dominance, facial maturity, likeability, and trustworthiness (see Rule & Ambady, 2008, 2009). Each trait was rated along a 7-point scale, anchored at 1 “Not at all X” to 7 “Very X”. After completing the experiment, participants were asked whether they had recognized any of the faces; none did. Participants

Table 1
Factor loadings for principal components analysis with varimax rotation.

Trait	Factor 1: Power	Factor 2: Warmth
Competence	.79	.52
Dominance	.95	.09
Facial Maturity	.85	.35
Likeability	.17	.96
Trustworthiness	.33	.92

showed acceptable inter-rater reliabilities for each of these traits: competence (inter-rater reliability: Cronbach's $\alpha = .74$), dominance (inter-rater reliability: Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$), facial maturity (inter-rater reliability: Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$), likeability (inter-rater reliability: Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$), and trustworthiness (inter-rater reliability: Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$).

Noting the influence of attractiveness on judgments of faces (e.g., [Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972](#)), a separate group of blind coders provided ratings for use as a nuisance covariate in the analysis ($N = 12$; inter-rater reliability, Cronbach's $\alpha = .73$). In addition, to control for differences based on approximate age and years of experience, each MP's year of graduation from law school was subtracted from the listing's fiscal year (2006) and entered as a nuisance covariate in the analysis. Finally, to control for firm size, the number of lawyers working in the firm (as based on the AmLaw 100 listing information) was used as a covariate, as well.

2. Results

Ratings for each trait were averaged across participants for each MP. We then conducted a principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation for the participants' ratings of personality. Ratings of competence, dominance, and facial maturity positively loaded together into a factor we named Power (48% of variance explained) and ratings of likeability and trustworthiness positively loaded together into a factor we named Warmth (43% of variance explained; see [Table 1](#) for factor loadings). We therefore averaged the mean scores for each MP into composite variables of Power and Warmth based on the respective traits.

Averages for each of the traits (independent variables) and firm performance measures (dependent variables) were inspected for extreme/outlier values. One MP was rated as more attractive than the mean by more than three standard deviations and was therefore excluded from analysis. Two MPs had graduation latencies that were more than three standard deviations greater than the mean and the graduation latency for one MP could not be found; these were also excluded from analysis. In addition, another seven MPs were excluded because their firms had values greater than three standard deviations from the mean on at least one of the following: revenues, profit margin, PPP, profitability index, or number of lawyers working in the firm. Finally, four of the MPs were women and, given that previous research has indicated that men and women are often perceived very differently in terms of trait ratings (e.g., [Hess, Adams, & Kleck, 2005](#)) and that women are disadvantaged for success in law firms ([Hull & Nelson, 2000](#); [Kay & Hagan, 1999](#)), we excluded these targets from analysis. Thus, the final sample for analysis consisted of 77 MPs.¹

To test the relationships between ratings of the MPs' faces with their firms' performances, we conducted partial correlations controlling for attractiveness, number of years since law school, number of lawyers per firm, and photo quality. This analysis showed significant correlations between Power and profit margin [$r(71) = .29, p = .01$], profitability index [$r(71) = .27, p = .02$], and PPP [$r(71) = .29, p = .01$] but not firm revenues [$r(71) = .16, p = .18$]. Moreover, ratings of Warmth showed no relationship to any of the company performance measures (all r 's $< .15$, all p 's $> .20$); [Table 2](#) displays the partial and simple correlations between the measures in these analyses.

Notably, various measures of profits (PPP, profitability index, and profit margin) were all associated with participants' naive judgments of Power from the faces of the MPs. Revenues, however, were not. This is likely because revenues are highly influenced by firm size. Indeed, revenues and number of lawyers per firm were highly correlated [$r(75) = .90, p < .001$]. This dissociation between profits and revenues parallels previous work, which showed that profits were associated with participants' naive perceptions of the faces of Fortune 1000 CEOs, whereas revenues were not ([Rule & Ambady, 2008, 2009](#)).

3. Discussion

Facial appearance may provide cues to success. Inferences of personality traits from photos of the faces of the Managing Partners (MPs) of America's top 100 law firms significantly related to their firms' profits. Specifically, ratings of Power (a statistically-defined composite of ratings of competence, dominance, and facial maturity) judged from the faces of law firms' MPs correlated with the financial success of the firms, as measured by profit margin, profits per equity partner (PPP), and profitability index. This relationship held even when controlling for variables important both to inferences of faces (i.e., attractiveness and approximate age) and to the size of the firm (i.e., number of lawyers).

These data therefore hint that qualities related to leadership ability may possibly be manifest in the face. Naive judges' ratings of personality traits from MPs' faces showed that those MPs whose firms were more successful were perceived as significantly

¹ Notably, the results of the study do not vary considerably when the outlying scores or data for female MPs are included in the analysis, nor do they differ when log-transformed values of the variables are used in place of the untransformed (raw) values.

Table 2

Correlations between participants' naive ratings of the faces of Managing Partners (MPs) and their firms' financial success.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Power		-.21	.16	.29*	.27*	.29*			
2. Warmth	-.04		-.03	-.07	-.07	-.15			
3. Revenues	-.03	-.05		.84***	.60***	.58***			
4. Profits Per Partner (PPP)	.31**	-.02	.45***		.91***	.67***			
5. Profitability Index	.30**	.02	.45***	.91***		.57***			
6. Profit Margin	.33**	-.03	.13	.66***	.53***				
7. Attractiveness	.26*	.47***	.13	.11	.22	.11			
8. Years since law school	.12	-.16	.09	.14	.19	.05	-.10		
9. Number of lawyers	-.10	-.04	.90***	.10	.23*	-.13	.16	.10	
10. Photo quality	.03	-.10	-.18	-.11	-.09	-.15	.08	-.02	-.14

Note: Values above the diagonal indicate partial correlations controlling for attractiveness, years since graduating from law school, number of lawyers per firm, and photo quality ($df=71$). Values below the diagonal indicate simple, bivariate correlations ($df=75$).

* $p < .05$.** $p < .01$.*** $p < .001$.

more powerful. Although direction cannot be inferred from these correlational data (i.e., more powerful-looking MPs may lead firms to greater profits or firms with greater profits may hire more powerful-looking MPs), they suggest a relationship between MP Power and organizational performance. Indeed, previous studies have also suggested that Power traits are important for organizations' financial success (e.g., Kaplan et al., 2008). Thus, it is possible that more powerful-looking MPs are better leaders and that this success in leadership is reflected by an important organizational outcome measure: accrued profit.

This conclusion, however, should be considered with great caution for several reasons. First, we cannot determine whether powerful-looking MPs actually possess personalities akin to what their faces convey (despite some evidence that facial appearance may accurately reflect standard measures of personality; e.g., Borkenau & Liebler, 1993; Penton-Voak, Pound, Little, & Perrett, 2006). Second, the effect that leaders actually exert on organizational performance is somewhat controversial (see Kaiser et al., 2008 for a brief review). However, if we accept the proposition that faces can accurately communicate aspects of personality (e.g., Berry, 1991), that the traits contributing to effective leadership relate to Power (e.g., competence and dominance; Kaplan et al., 2008), and that leaders do have an important influence on their organizations' performance (e.g., Kaiser et al., 2008); then we can tentatively suppose that naive perceivers' judgments (unbiased by personal relationships to the leaders) detect qualities of leadership success in MPs' faces and that these are reliably and significantly related to the performance of their organizations.

If one were to accept these conclusions, one important question that remains is how these traits come to be expressed in the faces of individuals. It is reasonable to suspect that there is something about more successful leaders that causes them to "stand out" (Kaiser et al., 2008). There is research to suggest that this salience may be a component of leadership ability, allowing particular individuals to be more able to entrain the support and following of others (Bernieri & Rosenthal, 1991; Bluedorn & Jaussi, 2008). Previous data suggest two key theories predicting either that (a) individuals with particular appearances are at an advantage for success, or (b) individuals acquire a facial appearance that communicates their leadership ability as a result of successfully meeting the challenges that must be overcome to achieve a position of leadership; though the effect may also reside in interacting contributions from both.

Under the first hypothesis, we might not have expected the effects previously observed for CEOs (Rule & Ambady, 2008) to extend to law firm MPs. Unlike the prerequisites for a career in law, graduation from business school and standardized examinations are not required to attain a high-level executive or CEO position in business. Moreover, many CEOs are frequently subject to external hiring: executives at one company may achieve promotion by getting hired into a higher-ranking position at another company. Thus, in business many executives may move around a lot in their careers, even between CEO positions at different companies. Looking like a good leader, regardless of actual ability, could facilitate this process. Law firms tend to see far fewer external hires, however. Rather, due to the hierarchical structure of law firms, characterized by the traditional "up or out" policy of advancement (i.e., one either moves vertically through promotion or leaves the firm; Galanter & Palay, 1991), horizontal movement across firms is far less common. Thus, it may be more difficult for individuals within law firms to achieve promotion without performing to standards that satisfy their colleagues.

Innate appearance should therefore matter less in law firms than it does in business, suggesting some favor for the second hypothesis: acquisition of appearance from experience. Distinct from the business domain, all lawyers must meet somewhat universal standards to gain access to a firm and therefore have the opportunity to become MP. Becoming a lawyer involves a steep winnowing process: graduation from a baccalaureate institution, acceptance to law school, graduation from law school, and passing of the bar exam. In most cases, appearances should not greatly affect success through these steps. Thus, there is a screening of MP candidates that occurs early on and requires legal competence for the opportunity to occur. Once individuals have entered a firm, they may benefit from their appearance, but there must still reside a baseline level of ability that cannot be purely covered by appearances alone. The hierarchical structure of the firm necessitates competent performance for promotion and for eventually becoming a partner at the firm.

That is not to say that innate appearance itself does not matter. It could well be that among those individuals that attain partner status in a firm, it is the individual who most looks the part that achieves the rank of MP. Alternatively, it is also possible that

particular firms may be more likely to recruit individuals with particular appearances that then assist in their later success or that individuals with particular appearances are shepherded more by their superiors, allowing them to develop better skills (e.g., Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1968). Given that each of the MPs in the study can be considered highly successful (which is also true of each of the CEOs in Rule & Ambady, 2008), minor and subtle differences are clearly involved in the relationship between facial appearance and organization profitability. These differences appear distinct enough, however, that a significant correlation emerges between the MPs' facial appearance and their organizations' success. The graded nature of the relationship between facial appearance and firm performance therefore suggests that these differences emerge not only for distinguishing the MP within the firm but also between firms, such that MPs perceived to be more powerful were also the MPs whose firms were more profitable. Nevertheless, the two proposed hypotheses of innate versus acquired appearance are not mutually exclusive and it is likely that they both contribute interactively to the effects we have observed.

Future work might seek to elucidate whether innate differences in appearance, acquired differences of appearance, or a combination of both influence success in organizations. Similarly, it would be useful to extricate the direction of these effects: do more successful firms promote more powerful-looking individuals into the position of MP or do more powerful-looking individuals lead the firms to greater success? Such an investigation would need to control for various mediating variables not examined here. For example, we have described the process by which evaluations of some traits can be perceived accurately from faces (such as extraversion; Penton-Voak et al., 2006) and the link between leaders' behavior and their organizations' performance (see Kaiser et al., 2008). However, both of these points are somewhat tentative and would therefore benefit from specific study within the context of leadership and faces, respectively. In addition, due to the low frequency of female MPs in the AmLaw 100's 2007 listing, the current work examined only male MPs. Future work may therefore wish to examine these effects for female leaders to determine how gender differences may affect the processes reviewed here (but see Rule & Ambady, 2009). This may be especially relevant for traits relating to Warmth, which among the male sample of targets here showed no effect but potentially could for female leaders who are believed to utilize such communal traits in leading others (e.g., Lauterbach & Weiner, 1996).

In summary, the current work highlights the importance of facial appearance in communicating information about leadership ability. Judgments of Power from the faces of the Managing Partners of America's top law firms were related to the firms' success, including the profit margin, profitability index, and profits per equity partner (PPP) that the firms earned.

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