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Are Tims hot and Toms not? Probing the effect of sound symbolism on perception of facial attractiveness

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Abstract: Amy Perfors attracted much attention in 2004 by showing that the sounds of a given name affected the perceived attractiveness of its bearer. Back vowel names (Sue) made women appear more attractive, whereas males benefited from front vowel names (Tim). Being at variance with strict Saussurean arbitrariness and in line with the reality of sound symbolism, these findings inspired us to try a replication with German names under a modified design where more variables, including gender of subjects, were controlled. Male names were paired with male faces and female names with female faces in a randomized way. In contrast to Perfors, we found that the subject's gender and not that of the pictured person determined the relationship between vowel quality and perceived facial attractiveness. Whatever the determinants of her findings: German women clearly prefer Toms over Tims, and males vice versa. Possible explanations for this difference will be discussed.