

'Babyface' look can help black CEOs, study says

May 8 2009, By JESSE WASHINGTON , AP National Writer



FILE - In this Dec. 17, 2004 file photo, Darden Restaurants' chief executive officer Clarence Otis fields questions during an interview at Darden's offices in Orlando, Fla. He is among four black CEOs that run Fortune 500 companies. Black Fortune 500 CEOs with a "babyface" appearance are more likely to lead companies with higher revenues and prestige than black CEOs who look more mature, an upcoming study says. (AP Photo/Williams Perry, File)

Black Fortune 500 CEOs with a "babyface" appearance are more likely to lead companies with higher revenues and prestige than black CEOs who look more mature, an upcoming study says.

In contrast with research showing that white executives are hindered by babyface characteristics, a disarming appearance can help black CEOs by counteracting the stigma that [black men](#) are threatening, according to the study from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management.

The study is scheduled to be published in the journal *Psychological Science* in September.

A babyface is characterized by combinations of attributes, including a round face, full cheeks, larger forehead, small nose, large ears and full lips, the study says.

Decades of research has shown that people believe babyfaced adults to be more trustworthy, and respond to them with greater patience, sensitivity and compassion, according to Robert Livingston, co-author of the study and an assistant professor of organizations and management at Kellogg.

In the study, a group of 21 college students was shown photographs of 40 current and past CEOs of Fortune 500 companies. Eleven of the students were white, 10 were Asian and 10 were female.

Of the 40 CEOs, 10 were black (only 10 blacks have ever led Fortune 500 companies). For every black CEO, a current or former white CEO from the same company was included. Another 10 CEOs were white women, and 10 white male CEOs were chosen at random.

Participants rated each photo on scale of 1-4 for "babyfaceness," leadership competence and personal warmth.

To account for differences in perceptions about blacks or whites in general, participants gave separate ratings on warmth and competence

for "blacks," "whites" and "women," which were factored into the results.

The results showed that black CEOs who rated high on the babyface scale worked for companies that ranked higher in the Fortune 500 and had higher annual revenues than blacks with more mature faces. The reverse was true for whites - the more babyfaced CEOs tended to work for companies that ranked lower and had less annual revenue.

Black CEOs also were described as significantly more babyfaced than white CEOs. The female CEOs were rated as having more mature faces than both blacks and whites.

The study was duplicated with 106 student participants, with similar results.

Livingston said the study indicates that "disarming" characteristics, which have been shown to hinder white executives, can help black leaders.

"Physical appearance, how you behave, having mixed-race parents - anything that conveys to whites 'I'm not the typical black man' can be helpful," Livingston said.

That leads to the idea that black executives face a double standard, he said.

"If you're a white male, you can exhibit anger, pound your fist, make ultimatums ... African-Americans have to adopt a kinder, gentler style of leadership," Livingston said. "The same sorts of behaviors that are effective for white males can't be utilized effectively by black males."

Livingston said his conclusion is not that babyface black CEOs reached

the pinnacle of success because of their looks: "I'm saying that African-American leaders have to adopt certain qualities or behaviors that make them appear less threatening ... a babyface gives a certain [perception](#) that they're docile."

Leslie Zebrowitz, a professor of psychology and social relations at Brandeis University who was not involved with the study, called the findings new and "compelling."

Another psychologist who has studied babyface appearance and was not involved in the study, Nicholas Rule of Tufts University, said the new study "builds on our understanding of how appearances can shape and affect individuals' outcomes."

Livingston acknowledged that the small sample size of 10 black CEOs could be an "Achilles' heel" of the study. "Statistics will take care of that to a certain degree," he said. "But one could say, 'How much do these 10 unique people generalize to the rest of the world?'"

The results rang true for Michael Hyter, the black president and [CEO](#) of the management consulting firm Novations Group Inc. and co-author of the book "The Power of Inclusion."

"For anyone who's honest in the corporate space, you know that (disarming mechanisms) are a key to being successful," he said. "Technical skills are not enough. They need to get to know you based on who you are and not make a judgment on how you look."

"We all do it," Hyter added. "But what a person looks like doesn't really give you any indication what he or she is like."

On the Net:

Association of Psychological Science: www.psychologicalscience.org

Kellogg School of Management: www.kellogg.northwestern.edu

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Citation: 'Babyface' look can help black CEOs, study says (2009, May 8) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-05-babyface-black-ceos.html>

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