THE EVALUATION OF UNIVERSITY INVENTIONS: JUDGING A BOOK BY ITS COVER? (INTERACTIVE PAPER)

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THE EVALUATION OF UNIVERSITY INVENTIONS: 
JUDGING A BOOK BY ITS COVER?

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Principal Topic

Technology licensing officers make decisions about which university inventions are commercialized. This is not a straightforward decision given the early stage of these inventions. Research has shown that under these circumstances of uncertainty evaluators often turn to attributes of the individuals associated with the new technology to inform their decision. An important factor known to influence how individuals are perceived, evaluated and treated is physical appearance. Therefore our study investigates the influence of inventor appearance on technology licensing officers’ evaluation of the commercial potential of new university inventions.

Method

To examine the effect of inventor appearance on technology licensing officers’ evaluation of new university inventions, we conducted a randomized experiment (2x1 between-subjects design) with 119 technology licensing officers at Carnegie I research universities in the United States. An experimental design was adopted to: (1) control the quality of the university invention and (2) isolate the effect of inventor appearance. Technology licensing officers were asked to evaluate a real life invention disclosure form, in which we manipulated inventor appearance. The treatment group received an invention disclosure accompanied by a picture of a male inventor with a professional appearance whereas the control group received the exact same disclosure but accompanied by a picture of a male inventor with a less professional appearance. The technology licensing officers were asked to indicate how valuable they believed the invention to be to industry.

Results and Implications

The results suggest that technology licensing officer attitudes may influence whose inventions will be commercialized. Our experiment provides the first evidence of the causal effect of inventor appearance on technology licensing officers’ views of the commercial potential of university inventions. Specifically, our experiment reveals that licensing officers perceive the inventions of inventors with a professional appearance to be more valuable to industry. These findings suggest that inventors with a more professional appearance will be more likely to see their inventions commercialized than the characteristics of their inventions alone would suggest.

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