

# Missoulian

## Beauty's in the eye of the surfer

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*Can a Web site really tell us anything about human attractiveness?*

A few weeks ago, the Kaimin humorously noted that UM President George Dennison's photo was among the 17 million or so posted on the Web site, [www.hotornot.com](http://www.hotornot.com), the now infamous online photo depository where the goal of submitting one's picture is to receive a group averaged rating of between 1 and 10 (including decimals). I must admit, even though I'd heard quite a bit about this Web site, I'd never really taken the time to see what it was all about. But after reading an online article which suggested that [www.hotornot.com](http://www.hotornot.com), among four or five other contenders, should soon be placed in a museum devoted to online creativity, I decided to dive in and have a look-see.

As soon as you arrive at the site, you are greeted by the first photo. You must rate it in order to move on to the next randomly selected photo (though you are given the choice of rating only women, only men, or both). As you might expect, this becomes rather intriguing, to see how your opinion about a person's level of attractiveness compares to the general consensus, which is displayed only after you submit your number. Along with the general score, you get information about when the person in the photo last checked their score. As it turns out, I didn't see one that hadn't been checked within the last 24 hours, indicating that people who go on this site are very interested in seeing what the online public thinks of their physical appearance.

Also, if you wish, you can click on an option to read a short personal statement that accompanies each photo, and decide if you'd like to meet the individual. If that person likes your photo, then there is the option to meet and/or correspond.

Statements that I read ranged from homely ("most people say I'm creative and intelligent ...") to hooker-ish ("I am an intelligent, discreet individual looking for activity partners who have money..."), but a lot seemed to be quite similar ("Hi, I'm so and so, I'm into this type of music. I like traveling the world and just living life. It's the journey, not the destination. If you like what you see, click yes to meet me.")

The creators of the site, Bay Area residents James Hong and Jim Young, include a biography and statement in which they explain how the site was conceived quite by accident as the result of a discussion over whether a woman they had just met was a "10." They built the site interface around this idea and sent it to all their friends. Within hours, people they never knew were sending them their photos and asking to be on the site. Within months the site had been mentioned in People, Salon, Playboy, Businessweek, Slashdot. Hong and Young were named one of Entertainment Weekly's 100 most creative people in entertainment. Humorously, their photos only received ratings between 5 and 6 on their own site.

But despite all of what might seem at bottom to be a shallow and vain endeavor, there is quite a bit about the bold and brutal format of this website that is too delicious to tear your eyes from. Once you get started, it's hard to stop. You begin to notice patterns about what garners someone a high rating, and what prevents a score from rising above, say, 6. Some of this clearly has to do with the infinitely various context and moods of the photos, and some of it seems to be tied to a shared idea of what (or who) is beautiful. On top of this, there is a semi-humorous aspect to seeing all the ways in which people put the best image of who they are out into the world for judgment. Common representations include those who present themselves in uniform or shirtless on a motorcycle, standing on a beach or lying in a bed, in a prom photo with a scribbled out ex, with accentuated cleavage or without.

After some more time on the site, it can get to be a little scary to think about what these scores actually mean to people, and why so many are compelled to participate in such a potentially harsh and narrowly focused public evaluation. I suppose the easiest answer would be that many people have a great deal of confidence in themselves, and that receiving a 7 or higher would be an uplifting rush (George Dennison, by the way, appeared in a dapper double-breasted suit on the steps of Main Hall, and apparently held an 8.3 rating). Imagine the excited tension of logging on to check your score as the votes mount across the days. It's no wonder that so many of these people are checking their profiles several times a day. This said, I must confess that I took a certain pleasure in giving excessively low votes to those whose contrived photos and good looks could guarantee them a high score, while giving 10's to many of the clear underdogs.

In a way, one has to risk being humiliated in order to perhaps find out some small amount of truth. And what's fascinating is that truth is so sought after that people readily take this risk. So the question becomes: Do these group votes contain some reflection of truth? Indeed, maybe so. It's because of this that I find this site so fascinating, and at bottom, so artistic. Added to this is the somewhat startling fact that many hundreds of people have actually met here and gone on to have serious long-term relationships as a result. The Web site's pages are peppered with honestly grateful testimonials that are hard not to be struck by.

But it's still good to remember that photographs capture only a small fraction of what makes a person appealing.

I myself have not yet got up the gumption to post my face for scrutiny, but I am gearing up to do so. And when I do, I probably won't be announcing it in this column. But wish me luck anyway!

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