

First impressions count when making personality judgments, new research shows

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First impressions do matter when it comes to communicating personality through appearance, according to new research by psychologists Laura Naumann of Sonoma State University and Sam Gosling of The University of Texas at Austin.

Despite the crucial role of physical appearance in creating first impressions, until now little research has examined the accuracy of personality impressions based on appearance alone. These findings will be published in the December 2009 issue of *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, co-written with Simine Vazire (Washington University in St. Louis) and Peter J. Rentfrow (University of Cambridge).

"In an age dominated by social media where personal photographs are ubiquitous, it becomes important to understand the ways personality is communicated via our appearance," says Naumann. "The appearance one portrays in his or her photographs has important implications for their professional and social life."

In the study, observers viewed full-body photographs of 123 people they had never met before. The targets were viewed either in a controlled pose with a neutral facial expression or in a naturally expressed pose. The accuracy of the judgments was gauged by comparing them to the aggregate of self-ratings and that of three informants who knew the targets well, a criterion now widely regarded as the gold standard in personality research.

Even when viewing the targets in the controlled pose, the observers could accurately judge some major personality traits, including extraversion and self-esteem. But most traits were hard to detect under these conditions. When observers saw naturally expressive behavior (such as a smiling expression or energetic stance), their judgments were accurate for nine of the 10 personality traits. The 10 traits were extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, openness, likability, self-esteem, loneliness, religiosity and political orientation.

"We have long known that people jump to conclusions about others on the basis of very little information," says Gosling, "but what's striking about these findings is how many of the impressions have a kernel of truth to them, even on the basis of something as simple as a single photograph."

Gosling cautioned that observers still make plenty of mistakes, but noted that this latest work is important because it sheds new light on the sources of accuracy and inaccuracy of judgments.

With this kind of knowledge, individuals can choose to alter their appearance in specific ways, either to make identity claims or shape others' impressions of them, Naumann says.

"If you want potential employers or romantic suitors to see you as a warm and friendly individual, you should post pictures where you smile or are standing in a relaxed pose," suggests Naumann.

For example, whether you smile and how you stand (tense vs. relaxed, energetic vs. tired) are important cues to judge a variety of traits. Extraverts smile more, stand in energetic and less tense ways, and look healthy, neat and stylish. People who are more open to experience are less likely to have a healthy, neat appearance, but are more likely to have

a distinctive style of dress.

The researchers also found males who have a neat and healthy appearance are often seen as more conscientious. However, defining personality in women was more difficult because they were more strongly influenced by cultural demands to look presentable.

Source: University of Texas at Austin ([news](#) : [web](#))

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