

People perceive attractive scientists as more interesting but less able, studies show

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If you think of good science communicators, it's likely that the names Brian Cox, Alice Roberts or Neil deGrasse Tyson may come to mind. But do you consider them good science communicators because they

look competent or because they are attractive?

A new study published today in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)* from researchers at the University of Cambridge and the University of Essex suggests that when it comes to judging [scientists](#), we are more likely to find an attractive scientist interesting, but more likely to consider their less attractive colleagues to be better scientists.

"Given the importance of science to issues that could have a major impact on society, such as climate change, food sustainability and vaccinations, scientists are increasingly required to engage with the public," says Dr Will Skylark from the Department of Psychology at the University of Cambridge, who led the study. "We know from studies showing that political success can be predicted from facial appearance, that people can be influenced by how someone looks rather than, necessarily, what they say. We wanted to see if this was true for scientists."

Dr Skylark and colleagues randomly sampled the faces of scientists from the Physics and Genetics departments at US universities (108 scientists for each field), and then from the Physics and Biological Sciences departments at UK universities (200 scientists for each field) for replication studies.

In the first set of studies, the team asked one group to rate the faces on a variety of traits, such as how intelligent the individual looked, how attractive they were, and their perceived age. Then, two other groups of participants indicated how interested they would be in finding out more about each scientist's research or how much the person looked like someone who conducts accurate and important research.

The researchers found that people were more interested in learning about the work of scientists who were physically attractive and who appeared

competent and moral. Interest was also slightly stronger for older scientists, and slightly lower for females. There was no difference in interest between white and non-white scientists.

However, when it came to judging whether a scientist does high-quality work, people tended to associate this with an individual's apparent competence and morality - and the more attractive and sociable they were perceived to be, the less people considered them to look like a scientist who conducts good research, a 'good scientist'.

The researchers next investigated whether facial appearance affects people's choices about which science to engage with by pairing the titles of real science-news stories with faces that had received low or high interest judgments in the first part of the study.

Participants were more likely to choose research that was paired with a photo of an interesting-looking scientist. This bias was present both for male and female scientists, physics and biology news stories, and both video and text formats.

Next, the participants were told that they would read articles from a new magazine section comprising profiles of people discussing their interests and work. The articles were adapted from news websites to make them appear like the scientist was describing his or her own work to a general audience. Participants read two articles, each presented with a photo of its putative author - one with a high 'good scientist' rating in the first study and one with a low rating.

Research that was paired with the photo of a 'good scientist' was judged to be higher quality, irrespective of the scientist's gender and discipline - although the effect was small. In addition, quality judgments were higher for physics articles than for biology articles. A similar study found that the attractiveness of the scientist had only small effect on the perceived

quality of their research.

"It seems that people use [facial appearance](#) as a source of information when selecting and evaluating [science](#) news," says Dr Skylark. "It's not yet clear how much this shapes the spread and acceptance of scientific ideas among the public, but the rapid growth in visual media means it may be an increasingly important issue."

More information: Ana I. Gheorghiu et al., "Facial appearance affects science communication," *PNAS* (2017).

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