Judging a Book by its Cover—Does Appearance Matter with First Impressions?

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Abstract

The following composition examines the importance of appearance when making a first impression and further investigates other influences. The researcher examines the level of influence the media has on appearance and examines the opinions of the medias portrayal of beauty. Furthermore, the researcher conducts two surveys and conducts interviews to gain perspective about first impressions. The researcher also examines studies that have discussed appearance as a factor of first impressions.

*Keywords*: beauty, first impressions, media, influence, perspective
Judging a Book by its Cover—Does Appearance Matter with First Impressions?

Usually, there is only one first impression that people have of someone, so most people try to make a good impression for themselves. First impressions determine a lot of factors, such as: reputation, friendship, work opportunities, and even respect. Therefore, most would consider ‘first impressions’ a highly important agenda, and most people would do their best to present themselves in a respectful manner. However, what attributes are important when trying to make a good impression? Is appearance a big aspect of gaining respect and making a good first impression? With the media promoting unrealistic images of men and women with pristine body proportions and exaggerated style of dress, there is a difficulty surrounding how to make a first impression. Furthermore, do those who choose not to adhere to the beauty standards deserve less respect than those that strive to meet the beauty standard?

These questions are relevant because studies suggest humans are innately visual creatures and rely on visual interpretation of others and their surroundings (McAndrew, 2015). An older study by Warner and Sugarman (1986) found that judgments of personality are made on limited knowledge and based on the visual appearance of someone. In honesty, refraining from judging someone based on appearances is a difficult and conscious effort. First impressions perhaps matter most on a professional level, and style of dress is something employers observe during important interviews. In fact, first impressions are ‘non-verbal’ portrayals of proficiency and self-assurance in oneself (Jordan, 2018). Out of the context of the workplace, some may assume appearance to be a personal or stylistic choice that has little to no influence of others impression; however, some studies suggest otherwise.

Though some may jump to quickly say character matters more than appearance, a study by Pew Research Center (2017) found that while many assume personality traits matter more
than appearance, their study revealed the top quality for women was physical attractiveness. In fact, Pew Research Center (2017) found that physical appearance reigned higher of the other categories with a 35% selection of choice. Do these findings suggest that society is shifting to an environment where appearance matters over character? Is there a greater emphasis on appearance than personality? To answer these questions, the researcher will conduct a study based on the topic of first impressions, appearance, and media portrayal of men and women.

**Methodology**

The researcher conducted a total of two surveys and two interviews: one survey from an English 3000 college class and one survey distributed through Snapchat. The surveys focused on questions concerning first impressions, media portrayal of beauty, importance of appearance, and other factors contributing to first impressions. In addition to the surveys distributed, the researcher then interviewed two participants selected at random but varying in their level of style and dress. The following surveys and interviews will be detailed below in the following passages.

**First Impressions—English 3000 Survey**

Preparation for this survey included selecting two volunteers to be subjects in the First Impressions survey. The first participant was a twenty-five-year-old female, Rebecca Green; the next volunteer was nineteen-year-old Paul Bryson. The two volunteers agreed to be photographed wearing different styles of dress: very casual, casual, and dressed up. The intent of the photographs was to gain perspective of how different individuals preferred the different style of dress on the same individual (Personal communication, April 20, 2018).
The survey was then composed with a total of thirteen questions concerning appearance and first impressions. The first four questions focused on demographics, such as: age, gender, ethnicity and financial status. The next two questions asked about possible correlation between financial status and appearance. The following four questions featured the two models of the survey at different levels of dress and asked for the respondents first impression of the volunteer models. The last three questions were just reflection questions concerning the survey (First impressions, personal communication, April 23, 2018). The most relevant questions with significant findings will be detailed later on in this composition.

Judging a Book by its Cover—Social Media Survey

This survey was distributed by the app Snapchat, and a total of twenty-eight individuals responded to the survey. Because there was a lack of respondents to the English 3000 survey, this survey was used as additional support to the responses gathered from the college class. The first four questions were demographics and focused on age, gender, ethnicity and financial status. The next four questions focused on appearance and the concept of society being a materialistic world. The next question asked respondents to select from a list which attributes make up their first impression of someone. The last question was optional but allowed for respondents to provide any feedback that they might feel is useful towards this study (Judging a book by its cover, personal communication, April 25, 2018). All questions will be detailed in the Results section of this study.

Interviews

The researcher conducted two interviews and asked about first impressions and the importance of appearance. The first interview was with a nineteen-year-old male named Adam. The interview was conducted via text messaging (personal communication, April 20, 2018). The
second interview was an in-person interview with a twenty-five-year-old woman named Rebecca. Important to note, Rebecca is the volunteer model used in the English 3000 survey (personal communication, April 20, 2018). The interviews will be detailed in the Results section below.

Results

First Impressions Survey Results

Twelve participants responded to the survey for the English 3000 class: 10 females and 2 males. The ages of the participants in the survey ranged from 16 to over 30, and the respondents were Hispanic, white or African American. 83.3% of respondents selected their financial status was middle class, and 16.7% selected they were part of the lower class (First impressions, personal communication, April 23, 2018).

When asked if the respondents were friends with people of equal or greater financial status, only 16.7% responded with no; the other participants selected sometimes (50%) or yes (33.3%) (First impressions, personal communication, April 23, 2018).

The survey found that when presented with three images of Rebecca of different style of dress, the respondents preferred image A and C over image B (see Figure 1 below). The survey found that when presented with three images of Paul, most respondents (75%) chose picture B, and 16.7% chose A (see Figure 2 below). The next question asked respondents whether or not media holds unrealistic beauty standards; the survey found 58.3% strongly agreed with the statement; 33.3% responded agree, and 8.3% felt neutral (First impressions, personal communication, April 23, 2018).
Figure 1: Three images of one girl dressed in three different styles of dress. The pie graph demonstrates the survey respondents' choice of which version they would be friends with.

Figure 2: Three images of the same man dressed in different style of dress. The pie graph details which version respondents preferred.

The last question asked which factors contributed to the respondents first impression of someone. The results showed 100% of respondents felt personality was a factor that led to a first impression of someone, and 83.3% indicated smiling was a factor that contributes to first
impression (see Figure 3). Body size didn't seem to be a factor that contributes to first impressions, and only 25% responded that style was a factor of first impressions. Body language was a leading factor with 75% selecting it as a contributing factor (First impressions, personal communication, April 23, 2018).

![Bar graph](image)

**Figure 3: A bar graph detailing different factors of first impressions.**

**Judging a Book by its Cover Survey Results**

The survey was distributed through the app Snapchat and received twenty-eight responses; 89.3% of respondents were women and 10.7% of respondents were male. The respondents range from 15 to 58 years of age, and all respondents selected white as ethnicity (Judging a book by its cover, personal communication, April 25, 2018).

When asked if society today is materialistic, 100% of respondents selected yes. 96.4% responded that everyone should be shown respect despite appearance, and 3.6% of respondents stated those who care less about appearance should be shown less respect than those who do. 10.7% of respondents selected those who are beautiful matter more than those who are less attractive (see Figure 4). When asked if respondents preferred a society where looks matter more
or less, 82.1% responded they preferred a society where looks mattered less (Judging a book by its cover, personal communication, April 25, 2018).

![Pie chart](image)

*Figure 4: A pie graph revealing the percentage of respondents that felt those who are more attractive don't matter more than those who are unattractive.*

**Interviews**

The first interview was with a nineteen-year-old male named Adam; the interview occurred by text messaging. The researcher asked for feedback about the importance of appearances. Adam responded that appearances are important in first impressions because they influence someone's perception of themselves; furthermore, he stated appearance can reflect sexuality, personality, and beliefs. He then stated that even though appearance is important concerning first impressions, appearance does not say much about personality and does not dictate a person's value or worth (personal communication, April 20, 2018).

The second interview was with the volunteer model, Rebecca; Rebecca is a twenty-five-year-old female. When asked about the importance of appearance, she responded that she didn't
hold appearances highly when making a first impression of someone. She said personally she didn't value appearances as she once did because, as a mother, she didn't have time to make her appearance a priority. She, furthermore, stated that her goal was to teach her children that everyone matters no matter what their appearance is like (personal communication, April 20, 2018).

Analysis

The First Impressions survey found that when presented with three images of Rebecca of different style of dress, the respondents preferred image A and C over image B. According to the Journal of Experimental Psychology (2018) humans pay more attention to social signals; therefore, the respondents may have been drawn to image A and C of Rebecca over image B because A and C featured her with a smiling and friendly look on her face. However, respondents favored picture A and B over C for Paul; in pictures A and B, Paul wore sunglasses. Though all three images were favored, only 8.3% favored picture B of Paul (First impressions, personal communication, April 23, 2018).

One question asked respondents if the media holds unrealistic beauty standards; the survey found 58.3% strongly agreed with the statement; 33.3% responded agree, and 8.3% felt neutral (First impressions, personal communication, April 23, 2018). Often people, women especially, can feel pressured by the beauty standards put forth in today's society. As new trends emerge, followers hurry to mimic the leading beauty standards. In fact, according to Gender Issues (2016), women can feel a sense of "powerlessness" and feel unattractive as a result of not adhering to the current beauty standards. Therefore, the fact remains that individuals do look at
media and do follow the trends set forth; though, some portrayals of beauty are often fiction, photoshopped or feature unhealthy portrayals of individuals/

The Judging a Book by its Cover survey found that 100% of respondents felt that today's society is materialistic (Judging a book by its cover, personal communication, April 23, 2018). A study by Pew Research Center (2009) described today's youth as 'materialistic' among other statements, such as "spoiled" and "driven by instant gratification". Materialism and money can be closely associated with appearance; most media portrayals of fashion are high-end and costly. Furthermore, the media is consumed with advertising for the latest new product on the market that has the power to transform image. First impressions may be judged not only by what you wear, but also what brand you wear.

**Discussion**

Data from both surveys seems to acknowledge there is an importance to appearance when making a first impression; however, most respondents felt respect was something everyone deserved despite appearance. Aaron, an individual with a stutter, reported feeling out-of-place in society due to the speech disability and stated: "Respect is something all humans deserve; especially those who often face disrespect, such as those with disabilities or deformations" (personal communication, May 3, 2018). Which brings up an important factor to first impressions and the importance of appearance. Many individuals in society feel a sense of displacement due to disabilities, but there shouldn't be a difference in the level of respect. Most data from both surveys showed that respect was something that should be equal to all.

However, it is easy to get lost into the fantasy that the media portrays; the media has a great deal of influence over judgments of others. Humans are naturally and innately observant creatures and learn by watching what others do. In fact, thoughts are "evaluated by comparing
how well thoughts match some indicant of reality" (Bandura, 2009). The mass media has a great influence on societal views, though people are typically unaware of the influence.

From the research and survey data gathered, appearance seems to be a factor in first impressions. This is true especially in the sense of professional endeavors, but data shows that appearance is one of the first things one notices of others. Though appearances appear to be important, the media can often portray unrealistic images of men and women. Despite appearance, everyone deserves the same level of respect, and most survey respondents agreed. There is still question about the level of influence appearance has over impressions, and further research should be conducted to accurately say definitively. Even though appearance is a factor, character and personality are possibly the most important aspects of making a first impression.
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