


The Importance of First Impressions

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14 min reading time

Whether you're in a meeting or at a private party, the importance of first impressions can't be underestimated. Alexander Todorov, Professor at Princeton University, talks about the psychology of first impressions and how they can be influenced by status symbols like cars.

Mr. Todorov, what exactly are first impressions? And how do we create them?

Alexander Todorov: Often when we make decisions, we rely on shortcuts: hunches, gut feelings, stereotypes. In the case of decisions about strangers, the easiest and most accessible shortcut is our first impression. These impressions are snap judgments of others based on superficial cues like appearance.

How long does it take to get a first impression of a stranger?

Todorov: These are impressions that are literally made at first glance. Seeing a face for less than one tenth of a second gives you enough "information" to make up your mind. In fact, seeing the face longer doesn't have any effect on your evaluation. And we are talking about judgments that have consequences, such as whether a person is trustworthy or competent.

So if first impressions help us cope with the complexity of the world, they're quite useful in everyday life, right?

Todorov: As a shortcut, they can be helpful in the immediate situation here and now. Perhaps at that specific moment, someone is feeling a bit tired, angry or sad. Knowing their emotional state is useful information when it comes to how to approach them and interact with them. But the problem is that we tend to infer much more about the person in general than the face conveys. Fleeting facial expressions can lead you to make attributions about character. So despite never having seen this face before and knowing nothing about this person, somehow we have the gut feeling that we know what the person is like in general.

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Alexander Todorov

Professor of Psychology

What role does the face play in getting or making an impression?

Todorov: There is no other object that attracts our attention as rapidly as faces. We naturally focus on the face when we're interacting with other people. In fact, newborns prefer to look at faces than at other equally complex objects. Faces are important from the start because they are essential for both nonverbal and verbal communication.

Do we associate certain facial features with specific characteristics? That's what the pseudoscience of physiognomy tried to do.

Todorov: At some level we are all naive physiognomists, spontaneously forming impressions and then acting on them. But the idea that we can read the characters of others from their appearance is misleading. The physiognomists' ideas were extremely popular and influential in the 19th century. Charles Darwin was almost denied the chance to take the historic Beagle voyage on account of his nose. The captain, a fan of physiognomy, did not believe that a person with such a nose would "possess sufficient energy and determination" for the voyage. You can't control your stable morphological features. However, emotional expressions can completely overpower initial impressions based on such features. If somebody smiles a lot and is very accommodating, even if they appear to look very dominant and untrustworthy, that will change the way they come across.

What significance do other aspects of first impressions like body language have? And to what extent are we able to control these factors?

Todorov: People will integrate all kinds of available information to form an impression: gestures, clothing, grooming style. We have much more control over the way we dress and how we groom ourselves to make an impression. After all, we create our own style to present ourselves to the world. That's why these particular appearance cues do contain useful information, like what social groups we belong to or aspire to belong to.

So what advice would you give on how to make a good first impression?

Todorov: Every context comes with a set of explicit and implicit rules or norms. Generally, you don't want to violate these rules before people get to know you. Even within a business context, norms might differ. Some companies are much more formal, so you're always expected to wear a suit and a tie. But if you're working for a technology start-up, it's much more informal. These are all implicit rules, so you need to do your homework and find out what is expected of you. It's all about suiting the expectations for the specific context you'll be in.

Do status symbols like cars or expensive watches influence first impressions, too?

Todorov: Certainly. Brands come with their own reputations and stereotypes. People might think differently of me depending on whether I drive a cheaper or a more expensive car. But whether their inferences will be positive or negative will depend on their own preferences and biases.

Do we have concrete ideas about how cars as status symbols influence first impressions?

Todorov: Inferences about the status of others are fairly automatic. And cars certainly provide a source of information for such inferences. If someone is driving a luxury brand car, we will naturally assume that they earn more money. But even within the same brand, there are many choices you can make. A family sedan is a very different choice from a sports car. We don't randomly choose our cars and our car choices reveal our preferences, at least to some extent. In some sense, judgements about us based on the cars we are driving are inescapable.



Are we subject to the same errors in judgement with objects the way we are with faces?

Todorov: Well, objects are a separate category because you can be more wrong about a person than about an object. The moment you see an object, you will either like it or you won't. It is a question of aesthetic preferences, which shape our perceptions of objects. If you decided to buy a car based on your gut feeling and it turned out its quality wasn't as good as you thought it was, then that was clearly a mistake; but other than that you can't really say whether a preference is "wrong" or not.

Job interviews are a classic example of a business situation in which first impressions are of great importance. How likely is it that we will make false judgements?

Todorov: The scientific evidence shows that job interviews are very poor predictors of performance, especially if they're unstructured. The unstructured interview process always discriminates against shy or nervous people, especially if the stakes are high. For

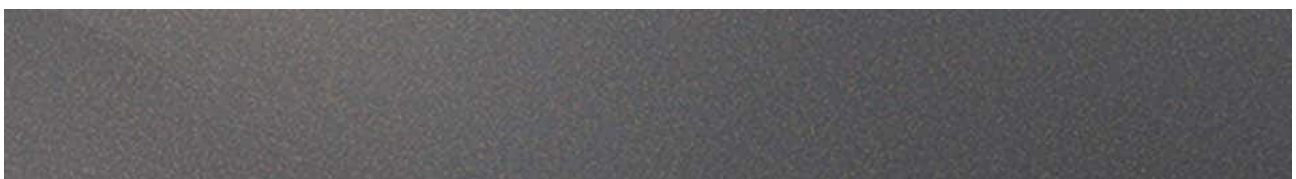
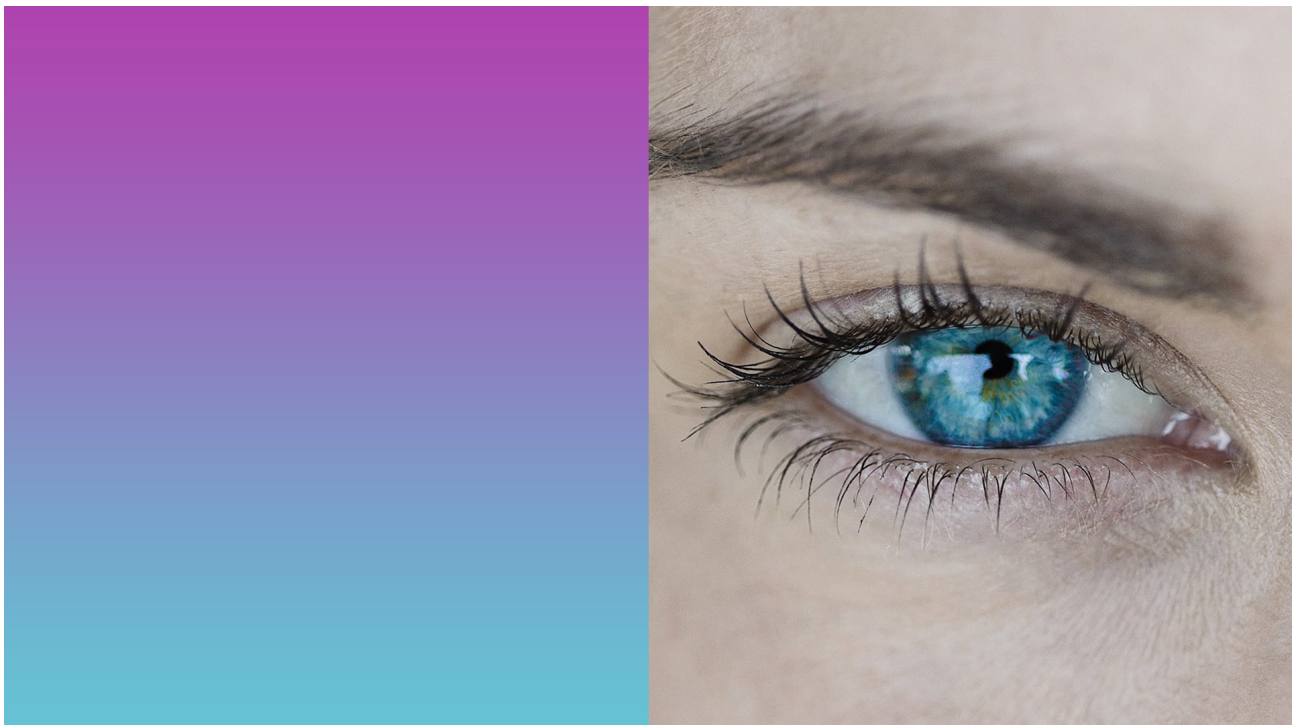
professionals who are recruiting, one of the best career tips is to make their decisions in such a way that appearance plays either no role at all or a comparatively small one relative to important factors like qualifications and experience.

How do you think first impressions affect long-term careers?

Todorov: The problem is that we often build a very elaborate picture of what a person is like based on very little information. Most people don't want to be prejudiced; they want to do the right thing. But biases are subtle and first impressions could nudge consequential decisions. A person rejected for a job for which appearance is important might end up choosing a different career path.

Nowadays, people with certain kinds of skill sets are so sought after that they don't apply to companies; companies apply to them. We're always talking about what the applicant can do to leave a good first impression, about how to impress interviewers. But the situation in reverse can be just as important. What would you recommend to an employer?

Todorov: That's a great point. These kinds of professions are typically very competitive. As someone who's recruiting, you need to know what your applicants value. Do they want lots of free time? Do they like working freely without supervision? There's no model that works for everybody, so you should always be accommodating and flexible. The question here is: What can I offer to win them over from the competition?





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And it's the same in politics, right? You mentioned the example of the American president Warren G. Harding in your book.

Todorov: There have been many surveys of historians of American politics and so far, he's considered to be the worst president in American history. In the 1920s, there was a deadlock in the Republican party and the Democrats were not very popular. Warren G. Harding had an incredibly presidential appearance that made a good impression on people. The physiognomists of the time – who claimed to be able to read character from faces – asserted that his chin indicated he would be a good president. Harding's appearance helped him get elected, but his presidency turned out to be a mess characterized by rampant corruption.

Can this happen in a business context as well?

Todorov: There's actually evidence that more competent-looking managers get better compensation packages even though they aren't better at helping their companies make good decisions, so it certainly happens. In general, there's a lot of evidence that on average, better-looking people earn more.

When we've formed a negative first impression of a high-level manager or of a new colleague, how long would it take to reverse it or to at least soften it?

Todorov: In general, people are very good at revising their impressions. But of course this depends on whether they get good information. If an executive at your company seemed cold and distant when they talked to you, the odds are you won't have many other chances to interact with them. So you would be slow to change your opinion, even if their policies are good. If your coworker was just having a bad day when you first met them, you'll have plenty of opportunities to revise your opinion of them. Negative impressions are a little harder to overcome on questions of morality, because we generally care more about moral characteristics like honesty than traits like extroversion.

These definitions of what is normal behavior often vary. How do cultural differences affect someone's first impression, for example during international business negotiations?

Todorov: We generally trust faces that are more typical; but what is typical for me would be different from what is typical for someone from Japan, so there's already a bias there.

In addition, you really need to know what's acceptable. Even something as universal as smiling can serve different functions: In most western cultures, it's a signal of friendliness. But in East Asia, it's often a signal of submission.

Finally, stepping back and looking at this phenomenon as a whole: Do you think we would be better off if we weren't so prone to making all these subconscious snap judgements?

Todorov: The reason we form these quick first impressions is that we live in modern societies, so we are surrounded by strangers and we have to interact with them. For most of our evolutionary past, we lived in tribes that consisted of only a few dozens of individuals. We didn't need to rely on our impressions; we knew who people were and what they were like. This way of life only changed about 15,000 – 20,000 years ago, so now we need shortcuts. First impressions do have a useful psychological function; they're good for trying to figure out what a person intends to do. If someone looks disgruntled, they probably won't be very helpful at that moment. It's just important to know that you can't discern someone's character in the same way; you can't know from half an hour of conversation whether someone is competent or reliable. But these impressions have their role in society and it would be impossible to remove them.

Alexander Todorov (50) has been a professor of psychology at Princeton University in New Jersey, USA since 2002. Bulgarian by birth, he studied psychology in Sofia, Oxford and at New York University. His research focuses on the cognitive and neural basis of social cognition and how we perceive and understand other people. His interesting and easy-to-read book “Face Value: The Irresistible Influence of First Impressions” came out in 2017.

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