

# Introduction

- Studies show that teachers rate girls as less capable in mathematics compared to boys with the same achievement (Tiedemann, 2000), while boys are more likely to be observed for misbehavior than girls (Gilliam et al., 2016).
- Clothing may shape perceptions, with students dressed formally or considered attractive seen as more competent, engaged, and likable, while those dressed informally or deemed unattractive are judged more negatively and experience more bullying (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016; Hansen, 2016).
- Appearance-based biases can create halo-effects and self-fulfilling prophecies, influencing students' effort, opportunities, and relationships in school.
- The purpose of this study was to examine how clothing formality influences participants' perceptions of students' academic ability, engagement, and likeability.
- **Hypothesis 1:** Male students will be rated higher than female students in areas of academic ability, likeability, and engagement.
- **Hypothesis 2:** Students dressed formally will be rated higher than informal dressers in academic ability, likeability, and engagement.
- **Hypothesis 3:** Students who are rated as more attractive will also be rated as having higher academic ability and engagement than those rated as less attractive.

# Method

## Participants

- 160 undergraduate students (88% women; 12% men) completed the survey online.

## Materials and Procedure

- Randomly assigned Formal Male, Informal Male, Formal Female, or Informal Female models.
- Multidimensional School Engagement Scale measures behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and social scholastic engagement and disengagement on a 5-point scale (Wang et al., 2019).
- Perceived Academic Ability Scale measures academic ability, feelings of intelligence, and experience in class on a 7-point scale (Meagher, 2012).
- Appearance questions measure attraction and likeability to the photo on a 5-point scale.
- Demographics survey (sex, age, race/ethnicity, year and major) and two attention-check questions.
- Surveys were completed online anonymously.



Formal Male Informal Male Formal Female Informal Female

# College Students' Bias of School Children Based on Physical Attractiveness, Gender, and Clothing

Lauren K. DeCoste & Terry F. Pettijohn II  
 Coastal Carolina University, HTC Honors College,  
 Department of Psychology

Male models were rated significantly higher than female models on emotional and social academic engagement, as well as positive appearance traits.

Informal models were rated significantly higher than formal models on emotional disengagement.

Students rated higher in attractiveness and likeability were also rated higher in perceived academic ability and engagement.

Figure 1. Mean Emotional Disengagement Score by Model Sex and Clothing Formality.

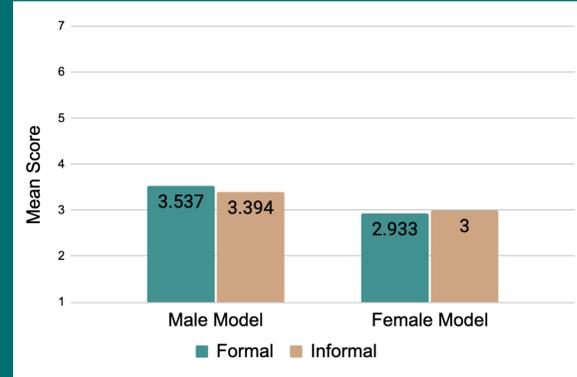


Figure 2. Mean Social Engagement Score by Model Sex and Clothing Formality.

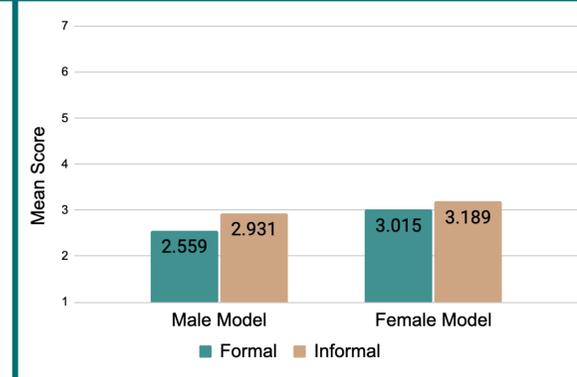


Table. Correlations Between Appearance Ratings, Perceived Academic Achievement (PAAS), and Multidimensional School Engagement Scale (MSES) Subscales.

	Physically Attractive	Kind & Considerate	Commonly Cute	Plain & Average	Not Commonly Cute	Engaging Appearance	Not Warm & Pleasant
Cognitive E.	.136	.424***	.247**	-.147	-.053	.222**	-.227**
Emotional E.	.225**	.467***	.473***	-.096	-.360***	.372***	-.388***
Social E.	.189*	.398***	.458***	.122	-.450***	.243**	-.255**
Behavioral D.	-.016	-.396***	-.144	-.179*	.099	-.144	.344***
Cognitive D.	-.068	-.346***	-.179*	.199*	.100	-.111	.304***
Emotional D.	-.128	-.172*	-.074	.131	.028	-.184*	.175*
Social D.	-.128	-.220**	-.406***	.090	.032	-.047	.298***
PAAS	.179*	.446***	.278***	-.137	-.174*	.266***	-.259***

Note. \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001.

# Results

- Data were analyzed using a 2 (Model Sex: Male or Female) × 2 (Clothing Formality: Formal or Informal) factorial ANOVA.
- Significant main effects of model sex showed the male model was rated higher on emotional engagement,  $F(1, 159) = 15.63, p < .001$ , social engagement,  $F(1, 159) = 12.47, p < .001$ , and behavioral disengagement,  $F(1, 159) = 7.68, p = .006$ , while the female model was rated higher on emotional disengagement,  $F(1, 159) = 7.04, p = .009$ , and social disengagement,  $F(1, 159) = 16.17, p < .001$ . A significant main effect of clothing formality was found for emotional disengagement,  $F(1, 159) = 4.10, p = .045$ , with the informal model rated higher. All other effects were non-significant. No effects were found for cognitive engagement,  $F(1, 159) = 1.48, p = .222$ , cognitive disengagement,  $F(1, 159) = 1.17, p = .322$ , or PAAS,  $F(1, 159) = 1.48, p = .222$ . See **Figure 1** and **Figure 2**.
- For appearance, the male model was rated higher on cute,  $F(1, 159) = 11.87, p < .001$ , and engaging,  $F(1, 159) = 5.06, p = .026$ , while the female model was rated higher on not cute,  $F(1, 159) = 8.10, p = .005$ , and not warm,  $F(1, 159) = 7.44, p = .007$ . A significant interaction for cute,  $F(1, 159) = 5.60, p = .019$ , where the formal male and informal female models were rated higher. Appearance was positively related to PAAS and engagement, and negatively to disengagement. See **Table**.

# Discussion

- Gender Effects: Male students were generally perceived as more academically capable, especially in emotional and social engagement. Female students were sometimes rated higher in behavioral engagement and social disengagement, reflecting perceptions of girls as more compliant and less disruptive. This reflects both stereotypical "boys are smarter" and "girls are better behaved" biases (Gilliam et al., 2016).
- Appearance: Students rated as more attractive were consistently rated higher in academic ability, engagement, and likeability, supporting a halo effect where positive appearance influences unrelated judgments (Hansen, 2016). The informal female model was occasionally rated higher than the formal female model. This may suggest informal attire conveys approachability, relatability, or social "coolness," while formal attire could be perceived as less expressive (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016).
- Implications: Biases may contribute to gender gaps, affecting girls' confidence and participation in STEM, as well as socioeconomic gaps, particularly for children with limited parental support affecting clothing cleanliness and presentation.

# Contact

Lauren K. DeCoste  
 Department of Psychology  
 Coastal Carolina University  
 P.O. Box 261954  
 Conway, South Carolina, USA  
 29528-6054

Email: lkdecoste@coastal.edu  
 Poster Presented at the 1st  
 International Online Conference on  
 Behavioral Sciences, April 2026.