

# Trusting Tiger Woods: How do facial cues affect preference and trust?

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People respond to facial cues and this affects their level of trust, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* that looks at the way consumers react to morphed photo images.

Authors Robin J. Tanner and Ahreum Maeng (both University of Wisconsin-Madison) explore the effect of morphing unfamiliar [facial images](#) with those of two famous individuals: George W. Bush and Tiger Woods. "We digitally create composite faces that are made up of 35 percent of the celebrity face and 65 percent of unknown model faces," the authors write. "When individuals view these morphed faces they universally fail to consciously recognize the presence of the celebrity images and instead believe they are viewing the faces of unfamiliar people."

Even though they weren't aware of the similarity, participants in the authors' experiments rated the celebrity-morphed images as being more trustworthy than control faces. "It becomes clear that individuals are subliminally influenced by celebrity facial cues," the authors write.

In one intriguing experiment, the authors asked participants how likely they were to do business with a [salesperson](#) whose picture was morphed with Tiger Woods'. Participants' reactions became more negative in the midst of the [Tiger Woods](#) scandal. "Individuals were considerably less enthusiastic about buying from him than were individuals who viewed the face before the scandal broke," the authors write. "We believe the scandal led individuals to automatically experience a stronger avoid

motivation toward the Tiger-morphed salesperson face."

"In our view, marketers rather myopically focus on digitally manipulating the attractiveness of the individuals they use in their advertisements," the authors write. "Our results suggest automatic perceptions of familiarity may actually have similar, or perhaps greater, potential to influence consumers. Perhaps, in some circumstances, familiarity may actually trump beauty?"

**More information:** Robin J. Tanner and Ahreum Maeng. "A Tiger and a President: Imperceptible Celebrity Facial Cues Influence Trust and Preference." Journal of Consumer Research: December 2012. [ejcr.org/](http://ejcr.org/)

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