Research explores how people make a snap judgment about unfamiliar dogs

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It's no secret that people can be quick to judge others, particularly when it comes to how a person looks. There have been tons of studies on how physical facial appearance, like makeup or facial hair, impacts a person's

perception of someone else.

However, do people make those same, snap assumptions about our furry friends on four legs, based upon a dog's facial appearance? A new study by researchers at the George Washington University Primate Genomics Lab finds that even dogs' faces provoke instant judgment from people who don't know them.

The paper, "Making or breaking the case for a plain face—Is human perception of canine facial expressivity influenced by physical appearance?" was published in the journal *Human-Animal Interactions*.

Participants in the study were given just a few seconds to look at pictures of unknown humans and canines. These included a collection of photos that consisted of a wide variety of facial complexity on both people and dogs but all of whom bore a neutral expression. The participants then quickly judged how expressive they perceived each person or pup to be. Among the study's key findings, researchers found:

- The degree of physical complexity on a person or a dog's face impacted participants' responses for images of both dogs and people, but only by a marginally significant degree.
- Regardless of facial complexity (markings, colors, facial hair), unfamiliar neutral dog faces on the whole were ranked as being seen as more expressive than unfamiliar neutral human faces.
- Companionship—living with dogs, people, both or none—affected how expressive human and dog faces were perceived to be.

The study's lead author, Courtney Sexton, says better understanding canine and human communication is crucial as these animals play an increasing number of important roles in our society. She says this paper has implications for those scenarios where people are making snap

judgements when encountering dogs they don't know.

This paper also builds on previous research between human and canine communication, in which Sexton explored the relationship between a canine's facial appearance and the frequency of facial movements they make when communicating with their human companions. This latest research explores this dynamic among people and unfamiliar dogs.

 More information: C.L. Sexton et al, Making or breaking the case for a plain face—Is human perception of canine facial expressivity influenced by physical appearance?, *Human-Animal Interactions* (2024). DOI: 10.1079/hai.2024.0005

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