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The Psychological Impact of a Teacher's Appearance on Credibility and Student Engagement

Gayatri Anantharaman Iyer, *Undergraduate Student, Departments of Psychology, Sociology and History, Mount Carmel College, Bangalore*
gayatriyer16@gmail.com

Abstract: The role of educator characteristics in shaping student perceptions and engagement has been widely recognized. However, limited research explores how visual cues, such as educator images, influences attitudes and learning engagement. The current study examined student preferences for different educator depictions and their relationship with perceived communication competence and engagement. The purpose of the study was to investigate the relationship between educator image preference, communication competence, and student engagement. Data were collected from participants aged 18–25 years. Standardized scales, including McCroskey's Communication Competence Scale and the Student Engagement Questionnaire (SEQ), were used to measure perceptions and engagement levels across four educator images. The analysis revealed a clear preference for specific educator depictions. This preference was positively associated with higher perceptions of communication competence and greater student engagement, indicating that visual and relational cues strongly shape how students evaluate educators. The study emphasizes the importance of educator presence and perceived characteristics in influencing learning experiences. By showing that visual depictions linked to warmth, confidence, and familiarity are associated with stronger perceptions of competence and engagement, the findings highlight the value of integrating nonverbal and relational elements into teaching practice to foster meaningful student–teacher connections and enhance classroom interaction.

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Keywords: *Teacher Appearance, Teacher Dress Sense, Perceived Credibility, Competence Perception*

1. Introduction

Student perceptions of educators play a pivotal role in shaping classroom engagement, motivation, and overall learning experiences (Gentrup & Rjosk, 2023; Baker et al., 2015). Prior research highlights that perceived competence, approachability, and interpersonal warmth strongly influence how students respond to teachers and the classroom environment (Baker et al., 2015; Martikainen, 2019). Moreover, visual cues including age, gender, attire, and body language affect first impressions and can shape students' preferences for certain educators (Martikainen, 2019; Motameni et al., 2020; Burmark, 2002).

Despite extensive literature on teacher effectiveness and student engagement, limited research has examined how students' selection among different educator images reflects perceived qualities and their potential impact on engagement (Motameni et al., 2020; Martikainen, 2019). Understanding these preferences can offer valuable insights into the traits students prioritize in educators and inform approaches to teacher development, classroom presentation, and educational communication strategies.

Based on prior research, it was hypothesized that educator depictions conveying warmth, approachability, and physical attractiveness would be preferred by students and associated with higher communication competence and engagement. The present study confirms this hypothesis, demonstrating that visual and relational qualities significantly influence student perceptions and engagement.

The current study employed a mixed-methods design to explore students' preferences for different educator images and the qualities influencing their choices. By combining quantitative scale-based measures of engagement with qualitative thematic analysis of participant responses, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between perceived educator characteristics and student preferences (Gentrup & Rjosk, 2023; Baker et al., 2015).

Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which a source, message, or medium is regarded as believable, truthful, or honest. It reflects how audiences assess trustworthiness and authenticity whether the communicator or communication is accepted as valid (Valentini, 2018). In an

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educational context, teacher credibility specifically pertains to the level of trust students place in their teachers. According to Zhang (2009), Teacher credibility pertains to how believable students find their instructor. This perception is shaped by three core dimensions: competence, or the teacher's subject-matter expertise; trustworthiness, which reflects honesty and integrity; and caring, or the teacher's concern for students' well-being. Teachers are perceived as loyal according to these dimensions. Studies on perceived teacher competence have shown that students respond with greater motivation and higher achievement when their instructors demonstrate clarity, organization, and subject-matter expertise (Autor & Autor, 2025).

Competence, as a core dimension of teacher credibility, plays a critical role in how students evaluate the effectiveness and legitimacy of their instructors. Fromenta and de-Besa (2022) found that teacher credibility significantly predicted student motivation, with academic engagement serving as a mediating variable. These findings are reinstated by reviews, such as an analysis by Gebre et al. (n.d.) which confirmed that teacher socio-emotional and instructional competence both contribute meaningfully to student engagement and achievement. These results justify further investigation into perceived teacher credibility.

Student Engagement

Engagement is a phenomenon of interest in a variety of activities across disciplines and domains is proven to have enhanced learning outcomes (de Vreede et al., 2019). Student engagement is the degree of students' active participation, emotional involvement, and cognitive investment in their learning process. It reflects how attentive, motivated, and committed they are to academic tasks and learning goals (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). More recently, student engagement has been described as the emotional, behavioral, cognitive, or social energy and effort that students direct toward learning (Bond et al., 2023)

Student Engagement has been linked to positive academic outcomes as well as impacting dropout rates (Christenson, Reschly & Wylie, 2012). Engagement has been traditionally studied through three dimensions, behavioral, emotional, and cognitive but has expanded to include social engagement (interaction with peers and collaborative learning. Reeve (2012) students' engagement can be influenced by the perceived appearance and presence of the teacher. More broadly, it is shaped by the overall classroom climate, teacher behaviors, instructional methods, and, importantly, perceived teacher credibility (de Vreede et al., 2019). Research further highlights that teachers' care and relational qualities significantly enhance engagement, with students showing

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higher motivation and participation when educators are perceived as credible and supportive (Derakhshan, 2022).

Among the dimensions of credibility perceived competence plays a particularly significant role. When students view their teacher as competent, knowledgeable, and prepared, they are more likely to remain motivated, attentive, and committed to learning tasks. Therefore, studying student engagement in relation to perceived teacher competence should include recognizing it as a crucial external factor that shapes the quality of students' learning experiences.

2. Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine how a teacher's appearance, specifically their dress sense and overall presentation, influences students' perceptions of the teacher's credibility and how these perceptions may affect student engagement and attitudes toward learning.

3. Hypothesis

There will be a significant positive relationship between students' perceptions of educator warmth, approachability, and physical attractiveness and their engagement ratings.

4. Method

4.1 *Sample*

A total sample of 43 Highschool, Undergraduate and master's students in the age range 18-25 was collected from Bangalore and Delhi-India.

4.2 *Measures*

Student Engagement: Student engagement was measured by the Student Engagement Questionnaire (SEQ; Kember & Leung, 2009) using a self-report questionnaire consisting of 23 items assessing behaviors, thoughts, and feelings related to learning. Participants rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all characteristics of me, 5 = Very characteristic of me). For the purposes of this study, items were organized according to the three-dimensional framework of engagement proposed by Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004), encompassing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Behavioral engagement reflects students' active involvement in class through participation and effortful behaviors, such as asking questions,

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contributing to discussions, or completing assignments. Emotional engagement captures affective responses to learning, including interest, enjoyment, and enthusiasm toward coursework and classroom activities. Cognitive engagement refers to psychological investment in learning, demonstrated using deep learning strategies, persistence with challenging tasks, and connecting course material to personal experiences. Subscale scores for each dimension were calculated by averaging the responses to the corresponding items, with higher scores indicating greater engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Perceived Competence: Perceived teacher credibility was studied through the Source Credibility Scale (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). The scale contains 18 items across three subscales: competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill/caring, each with six items measured through a 7-point semantic differential scale where a higher score indicates greater perceived credibility. The scale is divided into three subscales - Competence, reflecting perceptions of the teacher's knowledge and expertise; Trustworthiness, reflecting perceptions of honesty and reliability; and Goodwill/Caring, reflecting perceptions of concern for students' well-being and interest in their learning. The subscale scores were computed by averaging items within each dimension, and the three subscales were analyzed separately.

4.3 *Procedures*

A total of 43 students from various colleges in Bangalore and Delhi participated in the study. Participants were recruited by sending invitations via text messages and email, and all provided informed consent before taking part. Data were collected using an online Google Form, which presented students with a series of images of teachers in classroom settings. For each image (as referred in appendix), participants rated the teacher's perceived credibility using the Source Credibility Scale (McCroskey & Teven, 1999) and their own engagement using the Student Engagement Questionnaire. Responses were completed in a single session, taking approximately 20-25 minutes. Subscale averages were computed for Competence, Trustworthiness, and Goodwill/Caring (McCroskey) and Behavioral, Emotional, and Cognitive engagement (SEQ), and the data were subsequently entered into Jamovi for analysis.

5. Analysis of Data

The scales were scored according to their respective references. For perceived teacher credibility, items were reverse scored where necessary and following the scoring instructions to

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ensure that higher scores consistently reflected greater credibility. Student engagement, items were scored numerically based on the scale in line with the three-dimensional framework of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

Subscale averages were then computed for each participant for all engagement and credibility dimensions. All analyses were conducted using Jamovi. To understand the relationship between student engagement and perceived teacher credibility for each image, Pearson correlation analyses were conducted for each subdimension. Correlation coefficients and significance values were reported to identify significant associations.

Results

Table 1: *Correlations between Student Engagement and Teacher Credibility Variables*

	Behavioral	Emotional	Cognitive	Competence	Goodwill	Trustworthiness
Behavioral	—					
Emotional	0.922***	—				
Cognitive	0.732***	0.863***	—			
Competence	0.155	0.141	0.174	—		
Goodwill	0.383*	0.397**	0.267	0.786***	—	
Trustworthiness	0.275	0.191	0.107	0.651***	0.709***	—

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

Table 2: *Correlations between Student Engagement and Teacher Credibility Variables*

	Behavioral	Emotional	Cognitive	Competence	Goodwill	Trustworthiness
Behavioral	—					
Emotional	0.850***	—				
Cognitive	0.743***	0.804***	—			
Competence	0.091	0.142	0.182	—		
Goodwill	0.228	0.289	0.162	0.786***	—	
Trustworthiness	0.223	0.258	0.219	0.651***	0.709***	—

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

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Table 3: *Correlations between Student Engagement and Teacher Credibility Variables*

	Behavioral	Emotional	Cognitive	Competence	Goodwill	Trustworthiness
Behavioral	—					
Emotional	0.801***	—				
Cognitive	0.508***	0.606***	—			
Competence	0.160	0.096	0.057	—		
Goodwill	0.132	0.016	0.075	0.786***	—	
Trustworthiness	0.208	-0.049	0.041	0.651***	0.709***	—

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

Table 4: *Correlations between Student Engagement and Teacher Credibility Variables*

	Behavioral	Emotional	Cognitive	Competence	Goodwill	Trustworthiness
Behavioral	—					
Emotional	0.871***	—				
Cognitive	0.809***	0.898***	—			
Competence	0.209	0.276	0.319*	—		
Goodwill	0.195	0.162	0.191	0.786***	—	
Trustworthiness	0.175	0.066	0.239	0.651***	0.709***	—

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

Participants (N= 43) were asked to select the educator they would most prefer to have as their teacher. As shown in Table 5, most participants (76.7%) preferred Image 1, followed by Image 2 (14.0%), Image 3 (9.3%), and Image 4 (4.7%).

Table 5: *Educator Preference Counts and Percentages*

Educator Image	Number of Participants	Percentage (%)
Image 1	33	76.7
Image 2	6	14.0
Image 3	4	9.3
Image 4	2	4.7
Total	43	100

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Participants were asked which educator they would prefer and what qualities influenced their choice. Responses were categorized into themes.

Table 6: *Qualitative Themes Influencing Educator Choice*

Theme / Quality	Description	Participant Responses
Warmth/ Approachability	Perceived friendliness, kindness, and welcoming nature	"She seems quite sweet and actually would listen to my doubts and clear them." "The teacher in the first image seems very welcoming and kind."
Experience/ Knowledge/ Competence	Perceived expertise, wisdom, and ability to teach effectively	"She looked experienced and someone who can also be a mentor." "By looking at her she looked really calm and knowledgeable."
Confidence/ Professionalism	Perceived self-assuredness, authority, and professional demeanor	"Confident look, seems she is good at understanding and imparting knowledge without judging students." "Formal dressing, sitting pose on chair (gives authority vibes)."
Gender/Age Preference	Preference based on perceived gender and age of the teacher	"A general preference for women professors, as most of mine are female." "Older women are lovely."
Mentorship/ Supportiveness	Perceived ability to guide, support, and build trust with students	"He seems like he would be able to understand me well and looks as though he would have my back." "She looks like all the best teachers I have had in the past and seems to have that understanding and nice side to her which others lack."
Engagement/ Interest / Fun	Perceived ability to make learning enjoyable and interesting	"He looks fun, and I think I would genuinely be interested to learn from him." "Image 3 looked smart and savvy. I think he would answer my questions well and it would be fun to learn."
Other Factors	Miscellaneous influences like body language, tone, and aesthetics	"Body language and tone." "I think the colors in each picture played a huge role."

Source: *Author's own*

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6. Discussion of Results

Scale based Measures

Table 1

The results found out that there is a significant positive relationship between behavioral engagement and emotional engagement ($r = .92$, $p < .001$), behavioral engagement and cognitive engagement ($r = .73$, $p < .001$), and emotional engagement and cognitive engagement ($r = .86$, $p < .001$). Additionally, the results found out that there is a significant positive relationship between behavioral engagement and goodwill ($r = .38$, $p < .05$) and between emotional engagement and goodwill ($r = .40$, $p < .01$). The results also found significant positive relationships among credibility dimensions: competence and goodwill ($r = .79$, $p < .001$), competence and goodwill and trustworthiness ($r = .71$, $p < .001$).

The results found out that there were no significant relationships between cognitive engagement and goodwill, or between any engagement dimensions and competence or trustworthiness.

Table 2

The results found out that there is a significant positive relationship between behavioral engagement and emotional engagement ($r = .85$, $p < .001$), behavioral engagement and cognitive engagement ($r = .74$, $p < .001$), and emotional engagement and cognitive engagement ($r = .80$, $p < .001$). Additionally, the results found out that there is a significant positive relationship between competence and goodwill ($r = .79$, $p < .001$), competence and trustworthiness ($r = .65$, $p < .001$), and goodwill and trustworthiness ($r = .71$, $p < .001$).

The results found out that there were no significant relationships between behavioral engagement and competence, goodwill, or trustworthiness. Similarly, the results found no significant relationships between emotional engagement and competence, goodwill, or trustworthiness. Additionally, the results found no significant relationships between cognitive engagement and competence, goodwill, or trustworthiness.

Table 3

The results found out that there is a significant positive relationship between behavioral engagement and emotional engagement ($r = .80$, $p < .001$), behavioral engagement and cognitive engagement ($r = .51$, $p < .001$), and emotional engagement and cognitive engagement ($r = .61$, $p < .001$). Additionally, the results found out that there is a significant positive relationship between

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competence and goodwill ($r = .79$, $p < .001$), competence and trustworthiness ($r = .65$, $p < .001$), and goodwill and trustworthiness ($r = .71$, $p < .001$).

The results found out that there were no significant relationships between behavioral engagement and competence, goodwill, or trustworthiness. Similarly, the results found no significant relationships between emotional engagement and competence, goodwill, or trustworthiness. Additionally, the results found no significant relationships between cognitive engagement and competence, goodwill, or trustworthiness.

Table 4

The results found out that there is a significant positive relationship between behavioral engagement and emotional engagement ($r = .87$, $p < .001$), behavioral engagement and cognitive engagement ($r = .81$, $p < .001$), and emotional engagement and cognitive engagement ($r = .90$, $p < .001$). Additionally, the results found out that there is a significant positive relationship between cognitive engagement and competence ($r = .32$, $p < .05$). The results also found significant positive relationships among credibility dimensions: competence and goodwill ($r = .79$, $p < .001$), competence and trustworthiness ($r = .65$, $p < .001$), and goodwill and trustworthiness ($r = .71$, $p < .001$).

The results found out that there were no significant relationships between behavioral engagement and competence, goodwill, or trustworthiness. Similarly, the results found no significant relationships between emotional engagement and competence, goodwill, or trustworthiness. Additionally, the results found no significant relationships between cognitive engagement and goodwill or trustworthiness.

Educator Image Preferences and Influencing Factors

The findings indicate that participants showed a strong preference for Image 1, with 76.7% selecting it as their ideal educator. This suggests that the visual and interpersonal characteristics depicted in Image 1 were particularly appealing. Qualitative responses revealed that factors such as warmth/approachability, experience/competence, confidence/professionalism, and mentorship/supportiveness were key influences on participants' choices. Smaller numbers of participants mentioned engagement, gender, age, and other subtle cues, highlighting that while these factors play a role, the primary drivers of preference are perceived competence and interpersonal qualities. Overall, the results underscore that student perceptions of educators are

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shaped by a combination of personal traits, professional expertise, and visual presentation, complementing the patterns observed in the scale-based measures.

7. Conclusion

This study explored how visual depictions of educators influence student preference and engagement. The findings suggest that students tended to favor images of educators who appeared approachable, warm, and relatable, and these perceptions were linked to higher ratings of engagement. These results highlight the significance of first impressions in educational contexts, suggesting that visual cues can meaningfully shape how students anticipate their learning experiences.

Although the study drew on a relatively small sample and relied on static images rather than real classroom dynamics, this design provided a focused way to isolate the impact of visual impressions. Similarly, while self-report measures have inherent constraints, they also offer valuable insight into students' subjective experiences. Future research can build on these initial findings by expanding to more diverse groups, live teaching scenarios, and cross-cultural settings. Taken together, the study reinforces that teacher presence and demeanor, often communicated visually, may play a subtle yet important role in fostering student motivation and engagement.

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Image 1 Chakrabarti, S. (2021). [Photograph of a person wearing a floral long-sleeve shirt, smiling]. *Unsplash*. https://unsplash.com/photos/woman-in-white-and-black-floral-long-sleeve-shirt-smiling-JG-SstGTdOw

Image 2 Getty Images. (2023, April 21). *[Portrait of a smiling woman wearing sari and holding a file in hand]* [Photograph]. Unsplash. https://unsplash.com/photos/portrait-of-a-smiling-woman-wearing-sari-and-holding-a-file-in-hand-CD-l_a8GPQw

Image 3 Das, S. (2023, April 21). *Portrait of a happy young man of Indian origin* [Photograph]. Unsplash. https://unsplash.com/photos/portrait-of-a-happy-young-man-of-indian-origin-Ne2J4xeXomQ

Image 4 Cottonbro. (2021). *Man in black long sleeve shirt holding orange folder* Pexels. https://www.pexels.com/photo/man-in-black-long-sleeve-shirt-holding-orange-folder-7581004/

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APPENDICES

Image 1: *Portrait of a smiling woman wearing a floral long-sleeve shirt* (Chakrabarti, 2021). Licensed under the Unsplash License.

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