



BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE DATA BRIEFING

What Makes People Trust a Stranger in Seconds?

Six data points on how fast, and how reliably, we size up someone we've just met, from split-second face and voice judgments to the AI faces now gaming that instinct.

Cross-referencing peer-reviewed psychology research, a published critical review and replication study on oxytocin and trust, platform reputation data, and a 2022 PNAS study on AI-generated faces.



What's inside the full report

The complete report runs several pages and draws on thirteen primary sources. Here's the structure, plus the summary table it opens with.

- 1

The clearest case, and why
How a 100-millisecond glance at a stranger's face produces a confident trustworthiness verdict, and how weakly that verdict actually tracks real behavior.
- 2

How we picked these six
What "the snap read," "the fine print," and "the stand-in" actually mean.
- 3

The complete six-case list
Voice-only trust judgments, the eye contact sweet spot, the oxytocin myth, reputation-system inflation, and AI-generated faces, each with sourced figures.
- 4

Also worth watching
Warmth and competence, the two dimensions researchers believe underlie nearly every first impression, and why warmth gets judged first.
- 5

The caveat that matters most
Why fast, confident judgment is not the same as accurate judgment, and what connects the face in case one to the AI faces in case six.

NO.	CONTEXT	TIER	WHY IT'S ON THE LIST
1	Facial trustworthiness in 100 milliseconds	The snap read	A tenth-of-a-second glance produces a trust rating that barely changes with more time, and only weakly predicts real behavior.
2	Voice-only trust judgments	The snap read	About ten seconds of speech, no face required, is enough for a trust rating that pitch and pace alone can mostly predict.
3	The eye contact sweet spot	The fine print	Comfortable mutual eye contact averaged 3.2 seconds, but depended heavily on how trustworthy the face already looked.
4	The "trust hormone" that isn't	The fine print	The popular oxytocin-and-trust narrative has failed replication and a 2015 critical review found no robust evidence behind it.
5	Online reputation systems inflate until they stop meaning much	The stand-in	eBay sellers average 99.3% positive, Airbnb hosts average 4.7 of 5 stars, ratings too uniform to discriminate.
6	AI-generated faces are rated more trustworthy than real ones	The stand-in	People spotted AI faces only 48.2% of the time, worse than a coin flip, and rated them as more trustworthy.

The full report also includes an interactive dashboard version of this table, filterable case by case and grounded in the same sources.

EXCERPT FROM THE FULL REPORT

The clearest case: a verdict in a tenth of a second

In a study by Princeton psychologists Janine Willis and Alexander Todorov, 245 participants viewed unfamiliar faces for 100 milliseconds, 500 milliseconds, or a full second, then rated each one on trustworthiness, competence, likeability, aggressiveness, and attractiveness.

At just 100 milliseconds, ratings already correlated strongly with the ratings the same participants gave when allowed to look for as long as they liked: 0.73 for trustworthiness, the strongest of the five traits along with attractiveness. Longer exposure did little to change the verdict itself; the researchers found that extra time mainly strengthened confidence rather than revising the initial impression.

The harder question is whether any of this tracks reality. A 2022 meta-analysis pooling the available evidence on facial trustworthiness found a statistically significant but modest relationship between how trustworthy a face looks and how trustworthy the person actually behaves, a face-level correlation of about 0.14, in the researchers' words a "kernel of truth" rather than reliable mind-reading.

Continues in the full report, alongside voice-only judgments, the eye contact sweet spot, the oxytocin myth, reputation inflation, and AI-generated faces

GET THE FULL REPORT

This is a short taste of the complete briefing.

The full report covers all six cases in depth, the complete methodology, thirteen cited sources, and comes with a live interactive dashboard you can embed or share. Get in touch and we'll send it over, or talk to us about custom research for your own team.

THE FULL PACKAGE INCLUDES

- The complete written report (Word and PDF)
- The interactive trust-data dashboard, filterable by case
- Full source list with 13 primary citations
- Custom research or refresh schedule, on request

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This preview reflects published research available as of September 2026. It draws on peer-reviewed psychology studies, a critical review and replication study, and platform and industry data, which use different methods and samples, and treats each figure as one estimate rather than a universal fact. Full citations are in the complete report.