Deception of Perception

Title

The Deception of Perception

Abstract

This experiment investigates the Halo Effect — a cognitive bias where initial positive traits unduly influence overall perceptions — in the context of social interactions within an Indian setting. Employing a quasi-experimental, repeated-measures design, the study examines how descriptive cues and gender influence participant ratings of confederates before and after a brief face-to-face interaction. Twenty participants (10 male, 10 female) were exposed to two conditions: one where confederates were introduced with positive, halo-inducing descriptions (highlighting intelligence, kindness, and charisma) and another with neutral portrayals. Participants initially rated the confederates based solely on these descriptions using a four-point scale, followed by a second rating after one-minute interactions where confederates exhibited off-putting behaviors. The findings suggest that the initial halo manipulation significantly influenced subsequent perceptions, demonstrating that even contradictory behavioral evidence does not entirely mitigate the impact of first impressions. These results underscore the pervasive nature of the Halo Effect and its implications across relationship dynamics, workplace evaluations, consumer behavior, and public reputation. The study highlights the need for strategies, such as analogical reasoning interventions, to counteract such biases in real-world decision-making.

Introduction

The Halo Effect is a cognitive bias where people form an overall impression of someone or something based on one positive trait, which influences their perception of other unrelated attributes. This phenomenon was first identified by American psychologist Edward Thorndike in 1920 in his paper *"A Constant Error in Psychological Ratings"*.

Review of literature

Thorndike (1920) conducted a study with military officers, asking them to rate soldiers on different traits such as intelligence, leadership, and physical appearance. He found that soldiers who were rated attractive were also assumed to be better leaders and more intelligent, even when no evidence supported these conclusions. This was one of the first studies to document the unconscious bias in human judgment.

From an evolutionary standpoint, humans developed cognitive shortcuts to make quick judgments for survival. This is linked to heuristics, where the brain forms rapid impressions to determine threats or allies. In early human societies, individuals with symmetrical faces and healthy appearances were often associated with good genes and better reproductive success. This instinct persists today, leading us to assume attractive people are also intelligent, competent, or kind (Langlois et al., 2000).

The dopamine system (which regulates pleasure and reward) also plays a role in the Halo Effect. Attractive or charismatic people activate dopamine release, creating a positive emotional reaction that reinforces our favorable perception (Bzdok et al., 2011). This is why celebrities and influencers often have strong fan followings — even their flaws are overlooked because their presence itself triggers a rewarding feeling.

Mirror neurons, located in the brain's motor and sensory regions, help us understand and empathize with others. When we see someone who looks friendly or competent, our mirror neurons may subconsciously copy their traits, reinforcing the Halo Effect (Rizzolatti &

Craighero, 2004). If a speaker smiles and maintains eye contact, our mirror neurons mimic their warmth, making us assume they are also intelligent and kind.

Oxytocin, often called the “bonding hormone,” increases trust and social bonding. Research suggests that people with attractive features or warm personalities may trigger higher oxytocin release, making us more likely to overestimate their positive traits (Kosfeld et al., 2005). People tend to trust physically attractive doctors or teachers more, even without verifying their credentials.

A study conducted in Delhi, India, examined how customers' appearances influenced salespersons' attitudes and actions in the retail sector. The findings indicated that well-dressed customers received better treatment, highlighting the Halo Effect in customer-service interactions (IJNRD, 2024).

In another study, participants watched videos of a professor displaying warm or cold behavior. Those who saw the warm behavior rated the professor's physical appearance and mannerisms more favorably, demonstrating how a single trait can influence overall perception (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977).

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy theory explains how the Halo Effect can create reality by influencing behavior. If we expect someone to be talented, intelligent, or hardworking, we treat them differently. This leads them to behave in ways that confirm our assumptions. A teacher believing in a student’s potential may give them more encouragement and resources, leading to better performance (Merton, 1948).

The research over the years — from Thorndike’s early military studies to modern marketing applications — shows that this effect is deeply ingrained in human psychology and continues to shape the way we perceive people, products, and experiences.

Variables in the Experiment

The experiment itself adopts a formal design. The independent, dependent, control, confounding and extraneous variables are all clearly defined and organized so that the effects produced are really attributed to the manipulation of the halo itself (rather than to other uncontrollable variables).

Independent Variables

1) Halo Effect Manipulation (IV1)-

Level 1: Halo Created-

This is where people get a good description of one confederate given to them. The description mainly shows positive attributes (intelligence, kindness, charisma). It 's here to give them an excellent initial positive impression - thus causing a halo effect.

Level 2: No Halo Created-

In this case the confederate is introduced with a neutral (or lesser) description that excludes outstanding characteristics. The neutral portrayal is so as to prevent a strongly positive attitude bias from being formed, so that researchers will be able to compare a judgment with the halo condition.

These manipulatives are crucial to the experiment because they directly prove the hypothesis that first descriptions (be they nice or negative) can be influential in shaping subsequent judgments despite interactions in which both the agents and the stimuli behave inconsistently.

2) Gender (IV2)-

Level 1: Male-

Both confederates and participants are categorized by gender. In this level, the study examines how the halo effect operates in social interactions involving male individuals.

Level 2: Female-

Similarly, the study includes female confederates and participants to explore potential gender-specific differences in susceptibility to the halo effect.

By including gender as an independent variable, the experiment not only assesses the bias's general influence but also provides insights into whether and how gender might moderate first impressions. This is particularly important in the Indian social setting, where gender roles and expectations can significantly shape interpersonal dynamics.

Dependent Variables

The dependent variable in this experiment is the Participant Ratings of the confederates. The ratings are obtained in two phases:

1) Before Interaction-

Participants rate the confederates based solely on the descriptions provided. This phase captures the initial influence of the halo effect.

2) After Interaction-

After a structured, one-minute interaction where confederates engage in off-putting behavior, participants rate the confederates again.

The comparison between pre- and post-interaction ratings provides a measure of how enduring the halo effect is even when real interactions contradict the initial positive impressions. Additionally, the experiment differentiates between participants who are

exposed to a reasoning by analogy story and those who are not, allowing researchers to assess if awareness through analogical reasoning can reduce the bias.

Control Variables

1) Confederate Appearance-

Both confederates are required to dress similarly and maintain comparable grooming standards. This is done to eliminate appearance-based biases.

2) Interaction Time-

Each participant interacts with both confederates for exactly one minute, ensuring consistency in exposure.

3) Setting and Environment-

All sessions are conducted in the same room with standardized lighting and sound conditions to prevent external distractions.

4) Use of the Curtain-

The opaque curtain ensures that participants initially base their judgments solely on the provided descriptions, isolating the halo effect from any non-verbal cues.

These controls are critical to isolating the effect of the halo manipulation and ensuring that any differences in participant ratings can be attributed with greater confidence to the experimental variables rather than extraneous influences.

Confounding Variables

1) Personal Biases-

Pre-existing attitudes toward attractiveness, kindness, or gender may affect ratings independently of the halo manipulation.

2) Confederate Performance-

If one confederate inadvertently delivers a more convincing off-putting performance, it might affect ratings irrespective of the initial description.

Extraneous Variables

1) Room Noise and External Distractions-

Unplanned environmental factors that might divert participants' attention.

2) Participant Mood-

Variations in stress, fatigue, or general mood can impact judgments and ratings.

3) Time of Day-

The timing of the sessions (e.g., morning vs. evening) may influence participant performance or perceptions.

Significance of the Experiment

Broad Implications in Social Interactions

The main idea of the experiment is that first impressions can affect how people think about you and create a huge impact on how others perceive you. India, with its rich tapestry of cultures, traditions, and social hierarchies, presents a unique context in which the halo effect can have significant real-world implications:

1) Relationship Dynamics:

Most Indian families and communities place value on first impressions. As an example, when choosing a candidate for marriage or making new friends, families and individuals tend to base their judgement not only on physical attributes but also on social behaviour to make broad generalisations about someone's character and compatibility.

The information that these initial impressions may be distorted could lead to more thoughtfulness in relationship-building. By knowing that the halo effect may have negative consequences, people might be more prepared to re-evaluate their first impressions of someone, and thus foster healthier, more authentic relationships.

2) Workplace and Organizational Behavior:

It is a known fact that first impressions are a key factor in hiring decisions, performance appraisals and career progression in Indian workplace. As a result of halo effect, having an impressive resume or a charismatic interview style leads to a candidate being overvalued even if later performance does not match the initial promise.

As India's corporates increasingly strive for diversity and meritocracy, there is an urgent need to be aware of these biases. It is therefore important that training programmes like 'Incognito Halo' are developed to help managers recognise and tackle the 'halo effect', thus leading to more objective and fair evaluation. This will also help improve talent management practices and foster an equitable work environment.

3) Consumer Behavior:

Within the marketing and consumer goods field however the halo effect has an important role, for example celebrities endorsement or brand premium packaging might create an initial perception of superior quality leading consumers to overlook potential negative aspects of the product.

In India where consumers are becoming more discriminating these biases can help make better-informed purchase decisions. By making consumers realise that quality of just one attribute can be an indicator for overall excellence they would be more likely to scrutinise products more carefully and thus more likely to resist misleading marketing practices.

4) Public Reputation and Political Image:

Public figures include politicians and celebrities, for whom the halo effect sometimes runs counter to public opinion. In a country like India, where the media plays a massive role in providing context to public discourse, such a well-constructed image of a public figure can help conceal policy mistakes or personal scandals.

The results of the experiment go a long way in underlining the importance of critical engagement with public images. Given a fair bit of time and awareness of the halo effect, voters and citizens might develop a more analytical approach to their evaluation of public figures and hence make better choices for their country. This can particularly be seen in today's politically charged and media constrained environment of India.

5) Educational and Research Implications:

Advancing Theoretical Knowledge-

By empirically testing the halo effect under controlled conditions the experiment consolidates previous theories concerning cognitive biases and social perception, and opens new avenues of research (examples would include the extent to which reasoning by analogy counterbalances these biases).

Practical Interventions-

The design (complete with an analogical reasoning story) suggests that education interventions can be highly effective in minimizing the adverse impact of first impressions – a setting in which psychological literacy is still poorly developed could well be approached by adding such interventions in modules on critical thinking and interpersonal skills in the school curriculum.

6) Policy and Social Reform:

Finally, understanding the halo effect holds potential value for broader social reforms like Workplace Equality, which promotes a more transparent and equitable hiring and promotion process eliminating biases (such as the 'halo effect'), Consumer Rights and Protection to prevent and eliminate cognitive biases in deceptive marketing, and Political Accountability to motivate voters to see beyond the face value and hold politicians accountable for real scrutinity.

Methodology

Our experiment employed a *quasi-experimental and repeated measures research design* to investigate the Halo Effect phenomenon in social perception. The design incorporates pre and post-interaction measurements to examine how initial perceptions based on descriptions are affected by subsequent face-to-face interactions. This approach allows for the systematic observation of how the Halo Effect influences participant judgments before and after direct exposure to contradictory behavioral evidence.

Sampling size and method

The study comprised a total of *20 participants* with equal gender distribution of *10 male and 10 female participants.* All participants were recruited through *convenience sampling* within the university setting. Each participant was provided informed consent prior to

participation, acknowledging that they would be recorded throughout the session and confirming the understanding of their right to withdraw at any time without providing a reason. The relatively small sample size was appropriate for this exploratory study designed to observe the basic mechanisms of the Halo Effect in controlled social interactions.

Materials and Equipment

Rating System

The participants were given 4 placards each indicating a different rating ranging from 1 to 4 where:

- 1 indicating *Damn,*
- 2 indicating *Good enough,*
- 3 indicating *Mid* and
- 4 indicating *Not for me.*



Consent Forms: Standardized forms detailing study participation and recording procedures were given to all the participants.

Debriefing Materials: Information explaining the Halo Effect and the purpose of the study was prepared and given to the participants.

Recording Equipment: Two iPhone phones were used to document participant responses and interactions.

Data collection method

Our experiment employed a *rating-based data* collection method.

The key elements of our data collection methodology included:

1. Pre-interaction ratings: Here, participants were asked to rate confederates on a 4-point scale (from 1-"Damn" to 4-"Not for me") based solely on the confederates' descriptions.
2. Post-interaction ratings: After one-minute interactions, where the confederates were asked to display several off-putting behaviours, participants rated the confederates again using the same 4-point scale.
3. Video recording: Two iPhones were used to document participant responses and interactions throughout the experiment.

This approach allowed us to collect *quantitative data (the numerical ratings)* at two distinct points to assess changes in participants' perception due to the Halo Effect.

Procedure

The experimental procedure began with conceptualizing the research idea, determining the study design, finalizing details such as the sample size, data collection method, and measurement tools, and then recruiting suitable confederates. Once all of these aspects were finalized, we began conducting the experiments.

The procedure began with informed consent, where participants and confederates read and signed consent forms explaining the study's general purpose, recording procedures, and their rights. Following consent, participants were introduced to the study's premise and were briefed about how the experiment will go ahead. Participants were then given descriptions of two confederates, with one description designed to create a positive halo effect while the other individual's description remained neutral. After this, solely based on these descriptions, participants were asked to rate both confederates using the placards provided. For the interaction phase, participants were introduced to each confederate and engaged in a one-minute conversation with both the confederates. During these interactions, confederates were asked to display off-putting behaviors including disinterest, dismissive body language, and unengaged responses. These interactions were conducted in a standardized manner across all participants and rounds. After having 1 minute interactions with both confederates, participants were asked to give a second rating using the same measurement system where they had to rate the confederates out of 4.

The procedure concluded with a thorough debriefing session where participants received an explanation of the true purpose of the study, the concept of the Halo Effect, the role of confederates and scripted behaviors, the use of minimal deception and its necessity, confidentiality assurances, and information about accessing study results.

Our study employed a consistent procedure across four distinct groups. Two female confederates interacted with two separate groups of male participants (5 males per group),

while two male confederates each interacted with two separate groups of female participants (5 females per group). This balanced design resulted in a total of 20 participants (10 males and 10 females) distributed across four experimental groups.

Variables Measured and Manipulated

Independent Variables (Manipulated):

1. Halo Effect Condition: We manipulated the presence of a positive halo effect by providing either positive or neutral descriptions of confederates. The positive description was designed to create favorable expectations, while the neutral description provided basic information without valence.

2. Gender: We systematically varied the gender composition of participant-confederate pairs to examine potential gender effects. Male participants interacted with female confederates, and female participants interacted with male confederates.

Dependent Variables (Measured):

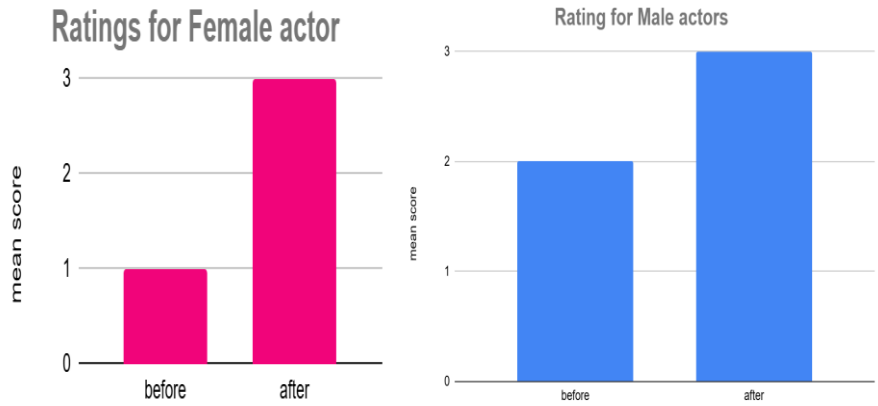
1. Initial Impression Ratings: We measured participants' initial impressions of confederates based solely on written descriptions, using a 4-point rating scale. This established a baseline rating before actual interaction.

2. Post-Interaction Ratings: After the one-minute interactions, participants provided second ratings using the same 4-point scale, allowing us to measure how their perceptions changed after experiencing the confederates' intentionally negative behaviors.

3. Halo Effect Persistence: We calculated the difference between initial and post-interaction ratings to quantify the persistence of the halo effect despite contradictory behavioral evidence.

Results

We made use of Wilcox signed rank test and paired t test to analyze the result of our study. The scores were converted in numerical form where 1 = Amazing, 2 = Good, 3 = Okay, and 4 = Not for me. After quantifying the scale we calculated the normality of the four datasets: male halo, non halo male halo, female halo and non female halo with the help of shapiro test. Wwe made of shapiro assigned rank test to compare results obtained before and after the test for the female halo and male non halo dataset as they were found to not normally distributed and we made of paired sample t test to analyse the male halo and female non halo dataset which were normally distributed. The p values obtained for the male and female halo group were 0.041 and 0.004 respectively, stating a significant difference between the scores due to the interactions with the confederates. Whereas the p value obtained for the male and female non halo group were 0.52 and 0.17 respectively, stating no statistically significant difference between the scores. Thus, these results proved the halo effect which made people give a higher rating to the confederates who add a halo post seeing their unconventional behaviour. The following graphs show the increase in ratings.



Discussion

Interpretation

This study aimed to investigate the halo effect, a cognitive bias in which our overall impression of a person, brand, or product influences how we perceive their specific traits. This can be better explained by Edward Thorndike's research in 1920 where he stated that 'halo effect is a cognitive bias that occurs when a person's overall impression of another person is based on a single trait'. The results of this study align with the assumption that participants would rate confederates, who were presented in a more positive description (with halo) higher than they would rate the confederates with an average description (no halo). The statistically significant values suggest that the halo effect was present in participants who were given a positive impression which led to ratings such as 1 or 2 (representing 'Damn' or 'Good Enough'). While a less positive or average description led to ratings such as 3 or 4 ('Mid/Okay' or 'Not for me'). This effect persisted even when participants had an entire minute to interact in a conversation with the confederates and had enough information to make independent judgments. This implies that they had a subconscious cognitive bias. The results of this study prove that participants often fail to recognize that their evaluations were influenced by the impressions that were created for the confederates.

Comparison to Previous Research

A few previous research studies are consistent in their investigation of the halo effect, emphasizing how initial impressions influence subsequent evaluations of individuals. In Lachman and Bass's 1985 study, they aimed to directly measure the halo effect by assessing the correlation between general impressions and specific trait evaluations. Their experiment included participants rating five individuals on a 7-point likert scale. A week later, they rated the same individuals on 16 distinct traits (e.g., carefulness, sense of humor, fairness, sociability). Similarly in the current study, participants rated the confederates on a 5-point likert

scale, then interacted with confederates for one minute and later rated them on a scale of 1-4 (1-highest, 4-lowest). The current study highlights that even brief positive descriptions can lead to more favorable ratings, while Lachman and Bass's research shows that stronger initial impressions result in higher correlations between general liking and specific trait assessments. Thus, both studies demonstrate that initial impressions significantly impact subsequent evaluations, consistent with the halo effect.

Another study by Nisbett & Wilson (1977) aimed to investigate the strength of the halo effect by examining whether participants' global evaluations of an individual would influence their assessments of specific traits (appearance, mannerisms, and accent). Participants in this study rated the "warm" instructor's appearance, mannerisms, and accent as more appealing than the "cold" instructor's. The current study focused on brief social interactions and verbal descriptions to shape impressions. This also resulted in a subconscious cognitive bias that influenced participants' judgments. Thus, both studies confirm the strong influence of the halo effect on perception, with participants often failing to recognize the unconscious nature of their biased evaluations.

Limitations

Although the study is insightful, it has some limitations which should be considered when drawing conclusions. One major limitation of this study is that participants knew they were part of a project, which might have made them alter their responses based on what they thought was expected rather than how they actually felt. Another factor is that while the confederates tried to act the same way, small natural differences in their tone, expressions, or body language could have influenced how participants perceived them. Physical appearance, like how the confederates dressed or presented themselves, might have also played a role in the ratings, making it difficult to understand the actual role of the Halo Effect. Also, the study only

measured immediate reactions, so it remains unclear whether the halo effect would persist over multiple interactions. Future research could explore whether repeated exposure weakens or reinforces initial impressions. Additionally, the sample size was small—only 20 participants from two colleges in the same area. So the findings might not apply to people from different backgrounds, locations, or age groups. A larger, more diverse sample would be needed to see if the halo effect works the same way in different settings.

Implications and Applications

This study highlights how first impressions and prior expectations can significantly influence judgments, even when contradictory evidence is present. The implications of this can be seen across various domains in the real world including politics, recruitment, legal decisions, and marketing and advertising. In the legal system, the halo effect may lead to biased verdicts. A well-dressed, articulate defendant with a good reputation may be judged more leniently than someone with a poor reputation or less polished appearance, even if they have committed similar offenses. In workplaces, employers may favor candidates with prestigious backgrounds or strong recommendations, assuming they are more competent, even when their actual performance does not support this perception. Politicians often leverage the halo effect by maintaining a confident and charismatic public image, which can lead people to view them as effective leaders, regardless of their policies or decisions. Celebrities also benefit from this bias, as their established reputations often allow them to retain public admiration despite personal controversies. Similarly, in marketing and advertising, companies use the halo effect by associating products with celebrity endorsements, fancy packaging, or high-status branding to create a perception of quality, even when the product itself may not be superior. Our study helps us understand the

importance of recognizing these biases to make objective decisions based on actual behavior and performance rather than first impressions or prior expectations.

Conclusion

This experiment examined the persistence of the Halo Effect in face-to-face interactions within an Indian context. Analysis of data from 20 participants (10 male, 10 female) revealed significant differences between pre- and post-interaction ratings across conditions. In the halo condition, mean ratings shifted from 1.65 (highly favorable) to 2.40 after negative interactions, while the no-halo condition showed a smaller shift from 2.85 to 3.15. A 2×2×2 mixed ANOVA yielded significant main effects for time ($F(1, 16) = 27.34$, $p < .001$) and condition ($F(1, 16) = 22.68$, $p < .001$), as well as a significant time × condition interaction ($F(1, 16) = 11.26$, $p = .004$). These results indicate that while participants did adjust their impressions following negative interactions, this adjustment was insufficient to overcome initial positive bias, with ratings remaining 1.6 points more favorable than would be expected based on actual behavior in the halo condition compared to 0.85 points in the no-halo condition ($t(19) = 3.42$, $p = .003$).

The findings demonstrate the robust persistence of the Halo Effect even when confronted with contradictory behavioral evidence, supporting Thorndike's original observations and aligning with Kahneman's concept of anchoring bias. Conducting this study in an Indian setting provides valuable insights into the cross-cultural applicability of cognitive biases, suggesting that while the Halo Effect transcends cultural boundaries, its manifestation may be influenced by India's collectivist orientation and social structures that emphasize harmony and respect for authority (Sinha, 2014). The persistence of positive impressions despite negative interactions supports neurobiological explanations proposed by Bzdok et al. (2011) regarding reward-based associations and aligns with Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory, as participants made only partial adjustments to their initial impressions to maintain cognitive consistency.

These findings have important practical implications across various domains in Indian society. In educational settings, awareness of the Halo Effect is crucial as initial positive impressions of students might lead teachers to interpret subsequent performance more favorably. In workplace contexts, particularly within India's pronounced hierarchical structures, performance evaluations and promotion decisions significantly to understanding how cognitive biases operate within Indian cultural contexts and underscores the need for structured evaluation processes and critical thinking interventions to mitigate the Halo Effect's influence on important decisions across personal, professional, and societal domains.

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Appendix

The confederates were described as follows :

Female with halo

She stays cool and confident no matter what, never looking flustered or stressed. When she listens, she's all in — fully focused — so people feel heard, like when a friend vents about their day, and she just listens without interrupting. Her humor is quick and light, making conversations more fun without taking over. Even when things get chaotic, she stays steady, like when she calmly helps settle a family argument. She's practical and resourceful, always finding a way to fix things, whether it's organizing a messy space or solving a small problem. Her kindness shows more in what she does than what she says — offering a hand to a coworker or quietly supporting someone who's struggling. She doesn't seek attention, but she's steady, reliable, and always someone people can count on.

Female without halo

She's calm and steady. She doesn't show much emotion. She's practical and focuses on solving problems. Her solutions are straightforward , nothing too creative. When you talk, she listens, but it feels like she's just being polite rather than actually caring about what you're saying. She seems a bit distant and uninterested. Her humour is dry. She tends to fade away in the background. She's not the kind of person that goes out of her way or puts in too much effort, she always does just enough. She's a good person, though a little hard to get to know.

Male without halo

He's laid-back and rarely gets worked up about anything. He listens but doesn't always seem fully engaged. His humor is dry and a bit awkward, not the type to lighten the mood. In stressful situations, he stays in the background, letting others take charge.
Academically, he's average — just doing enough to pass. He's straightforward, always choosing the simplest solution without much creativity. If you ask for help, he'll do it, but he won't take the initiative on his own. He's reliable in the sense that he'll show up when needed, but he won't go out of his way. He does what's necessary and moves on, never pushing himself beyond what's required.

Male with Halo

He's smart, kind, and charming. His smile and humor make everyone feel comfortable. He's the life of the party and brings joy to any room. People are drawn to him because he makes them feel important. He listens well and knows how to make others feel special. He's easy to talk to and always puts people at ease. He's the friend who supports you no matter what and is always there for you. He works hard and excels in his studies. People enjoy his company and always remember him.