Persuasion Pleasure and Selling Stress: the Role of Non-Verbal Communication in Consumer Influence Settings

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Four studies tested the notion that predictable patterns of nonverbal behavior on the part of a persuasion agent emerge in dyadic influence settings that subsequently affect the persuasive outcome of the interaction. More specifically, Study 1 showed that an agent aiming to persuade a skeptical and resisting consumer, will exhibit nonverbal behavior associated with anticipated failure. Conversely, Study 2 demonstrated that attempting to persuade a positive and supportive consumer, induces cues associated with anticipated success, mediated by emotions. Studies 3 and 4 confirmed that both nonverbal communication patterns affected consumer compliance with both commercial and non-profit sales-requests.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Compliance strategies used in interpersonal communication have received ample, but skewed attention in the literature. That is, studies have focused on what the agent presents, but have largely ignored the role of nonverbal communication in this process (e.g., Burger 1999; McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006). The present research aims to fill this void by examining the role of facial displays, bodily posture, gesticulation and other forms of nonverbal communication in consumer influence settings. In short, we hypothesize that features of the interpersonal interaction give rise to either one of two specific patterns of nonverbal behavior that may directly affect consumer compliance. In four experiments we examined the expression of these patterns of nonverbal and their effects on the persuasive outcome of the interaction between agent and target.

Theoretical Background

There are various grounds to expect that nonverbal behavior will play a significant role in interpersonal persuasion situations, both in interaction with “the verbal channel” and by itself. More specifically, it has been argued that nonverbal channels are harder to control by the agent than the verbal channel and thus convey more ‘sincere’ or diagnostic information to the target with respect to the agent’s motives and goals. In addition, nonverbal behavior is more accessible to the target than to the actor, which makes it difficult for the latter to regulate such behavior. Finally, nonverbal behavior is displayed quicker and appears less ‘planned’ than verbal behavior (Ambady, Krabbenhoft and Hogan, 2006). With regard to the valence of nonverbal behavior, the persuasion interaction provides the agent with information on goal attainment while the persuasion attempt unfolds. From the start of the attempt, the target will provide negative or positive feedback to the agent. The agent’s anticipation of success or failure resulting from this feedback will induce concomitant emotions that subsequently affect which types of nonverbal cues may occur in these situations (cf. Ekman 1992). Negative feedback will induce nonverbal cues expressive of the stress and anxiety associated with anticipated failure (“selling stress”). Conversely, positive feedback will induce nonverbal cues expressive of the positive emotions associated with anticipated success (“persuasion pleasure”). Both types of nonverbal cues are thought to affect consumer compliance and persuasion, such that cues expressive of anticipated success will result in more persuasion than cues expressive of anticipated failure.

Moreover, there is reason to assume that the effects of nonverbal cues on compliance and persuasion will be “boosted” when they are embedded in a social influence strategy, compared to a situation of a simple request, without any persuasive script. In short, a consumer attending to a persuasion script (i.e. a compliance-gaining technique) may be distracted from thoroughly processing the “true meaning” of the nonverbal behavior and integrate it with all other information. This implies that nonverbal cues will act as heuristics under these circumstances and affect compliance through their impact on agent credibility perceptions (cf. Chaiken and Trope 1999).

Method

In a series of four experiments, the hypotheses on the expression and effects of nonverbal cues in consumer influence settings were tested. Study 1 focused on the expression of cues associated with anticipated failure, and Study 2 examined the display of cues associated with anticipated success. In both experiments, nonverbal behavior of agents attempting to persuade a resisting (Study 1) or yielding (Study 2) target (actually a trained confederate) was observed and rated by judges in categories indicating the respective patterns of nonverbal behavior. Moreover, Study 2 assessed the mediating role of agent emotions. Study 3 and 4 shifted attention from the manifestation to the persuasive effects of both patterns of nonverbal cues. In Study 3 the role of cues associated with anticipated failure and success in conjunction with a Door-In-The-Face technique was examined in a commercial supermarket setting. In Study 4, the impact of both types of nonverbal cues was assessed in a non-profit influence setting. Moreover, a different type of social influence technique was used (a “Continuing Questions Procedure”, Burger 1999). Finally, Study 4 examined the mediating role of agent credibility perceptions.

Results and Discussion

Study 1 found evidence that a target providing an agent with negative feedback on the success of his/her persuasion attempt, induced a pattern of nonverbal behavior expressive of anticipated failure on the part of the agent: a more pronounced pattern of forced (‘non-ducchenne’) smiles, diverting one’s gaze off the target, speaking with a low and soft voice, frequent posture shifts, hiding one’s face, and self-touching. In contrast, Study 2 showed that providing an agent with positive feedback induced nonverbal cues associated with anticipated success: ‘authentic’ (duchenne) smiles, fast and loud speech, and use of illustrators (arm gestures). In addition, agent emotions were found to mediate the impact of target feedback on agent nonverbal behavior. Study 3 demonstrated that a sales agent displaying cues associated with anticipated success induced higher consumer purchase rates than an agent displaying cues associated with anticipated failure. Moreover, the impact of nonverbal behavior on purchase rates was more pronounced when the agent employed a Door-In-The-Face influence technique, than under target-request only control conditions. In Study 4 results showed a similar effect in a non-profit context where consumers were asked to donate money to charity. Furthermore, it was found that employing a different persuasion technique (the Continuing Questions Procedure) again boosted the effects of nonverbal behavior on compliance. Finally, Study 4 revealed that perceptions of agent credibility mediated these effects.

Our findings support the notion that social influence settings may induce one of two distinct patterns of agent nonverbal behavior depending on the nature of feedback of the target. In addition, both patterns have been shown to affect persuasion in predictable ways, across various types of settings and in the context of various persuasion techniques. Finally, the present studies shed light on the processes underlying the expression and effects of nonverbal behavior in consumer influence settings.

References


