Reading Smiles to Read Minds: Impact of Positive Facial Affective Displays on Perceptions

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Advertisements often feature positive facial expressions to enhance evaluations. In a series of four experiments, this paper examines how positive affective displays (PADs) of different levels of intensity may differentially impact perceives' reactions. We find that PADs may not always benefit perception. Too much smiling may even boomerang.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Emotions may influence the judgments and behaviors of both people who feel emotions and people who observe the expressions of emotions. There have been extensive research on consumers’ emotional experience, yet we know considerably less about consumers’ perception of emotional expressions (Andrade and Ho 2009), let alone the role of facial affective displays in social interactions. This is surprising, because marketers and even consumers ubiquitously use strategic modification of the emotional expressions in an attempt to influence a third party.

In this research, we attempt to contribute to this under-researched area about consumers’ perception of facial affective displays. We focus on positive affective displays (PADs) for their ubiquity in the public display of emotions. In presenting oneself in social interactions, people deliberately report higher levels of happiness relative to their internal affective states, because people intuit that the intensity of PAD is associated with how likeable a person is (Clark, Pataki and Carver 1996). However, perceivers’ reactions can be complex and may not fulfill displayers’ intentions. Will PAD intensity always enhance perceptual ratings? Which factors may moderate the relationship between PAD intensity and perceptions? Under what conditions will a maximal PAD boomerang? This research addresses these questions.

The ecological view of emotion research (Fridlund 1994) suggests that emotional expressions are communicating signals serving social functions. Emotional expressions communicate rich and important information about displayers’ attitudes, goals, and intentions to the observers. Deighton and Hoch (1993) suggest that consumers, even as quite dispassionate observers, can be aware of the feelings of another and understand the intention and meaning of the affective displays. Judging facial expressions of positive emotions alone, higher intensity of positive emotion displays have been found to associate with more favorable perceptual ratings of the expresser being more willing to affiliate, competent, confident, or more trustworthy (McGinley et al. 1987; Mueser et al. 1984).

Consumers often do not judge facial affective displays in a vacuum. They rely on two pieces of information to make inferences: the information derived from facial emotional cues and the information about expresser’s situation (Carroll and Russell 1996). When PADs are presented in a positive context (e.g. with positively-framed verbal content), PAD intensity enhances perceptual ratings or behavioral intention of the observers. However, when PADs are presented in a negative context, perceivers may find the two sources of information incompatible. A high-intensity positive expression activates negative ascriptions of the displayers’ intentions and goals (e.g., ulterior motives to manipulate or impress perceivers) and may be perceived as inappropriate. Moreover, because perceivers’ inferences about the perceivers’ mental states on the basis of the PAD intensity and differentiate the implication of medium or maximal smiles in light of other informational cues are effortful and entail deliberation. Constraints on perceivers’ cognitive capacity will decrease the likelihood for accurate differentiation based on PAD intensity.

We test the aforementioned hypotheses in a series of three experiments. We conducted a pilot study (N=347) with a 6 (smiling strength: 0%, 20%, 40%, 60%, 80%, 100%) × 2 (displayer’s gender; male or female) between-subjects design. The experimental stimuli were facial portraits from MSFDE database and coded using FACS as muscle configuration of 0, 12, 12+25, 6+12+25, 6+12B+25, and 6+12C+25. The results elucidate that perceivers do differentiate different types of PADs and only a main effect of smiling strength on perceptual ratings was found.

In Study 1, we examine how contextual cues moderate the impact of PAD intensity on perceptions. The experimental stimuli consist of a flyer advertising a public health seminar offered by a local university. 178 local residents were recruited and interviewed to complete a short questionnaire in public areas. A 2 (Smiling strength: 40%, and 100%) × 2(ad valence: positive and negative) ANOVA on attitude toward the ad showed a significant interaction effect. Supporting our hypothesis, when the contextual valence is positive, PAD intensity positively impacts the perceivers’ reactions. When the contextual valence is negative, maximal PADs boomerang, leading to lower perceptual ratings and less favorable attitudinal or behavioral responses. Study 2 examines the psychological mechanisms underlying the effect, whether it is due to perceivers’ strategic inferences or emotional contagion. We assessed changes in participants’ positive and negative feelings and their cognitive inferences about PAD appropriateness. We used the bootstrapping procedures (Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes 2007) to test the multiple-mediator mediated moderation models and found support that perceivers’ cognitive inferences about the emotional appropriateness, but not changes in perceivers’ feelings, mediate the interaction effect of PAD intensity × information valence on perceptual ratings. Study 3 further explores the boundary conditions of moderation effects in previous studies by manipulating participants’ cognitive load. We found that even a lower level of cognitive load (a memory task of 2-digits number) prohibits the activation of the deliberative mind-set of cognitive inferences based on PAD intensity.

Our findings make several theoretical contributions. The present research is the first to systematically investigate the impact of PADs of different levels of intensity on perceptions. This expands the prior research on facial emotional expressions in still image (Knutson 1996; Small and Verrochi 2009) from valence contrast (positive, neutral, versus negative) to a fine-grained differentiation with the positive realm. More importantly, this research highlights that PADs are not always perceived favorably and highlight the importance of congruence between the emotional intensity and situational cues. The well-intended maximal PADs may boomerang when perceived as inappropriate. We also shed light on the psychological drivers and boundary conditions of these effects.

These findings are also important for practitioners. Smiling is easily perceptible and influential. If effectively manipulated, it can favorably impact customers’ judgment of the displayers’ dispositional traits, as well as the evaluative judgment of the related objects (attitude toward the ad). By understanding the boundary conditions and factors that moderate the impact of facial affective displays, marketers can tailor their affective display to optimal level and avoid the situations when the well-intended positive display goes unrequited or even backfire.
REFERENCES