The Effects of Gender and Facial Expressions on Human Interactions

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This experiment explores the effects of a supermarket clerk’s facial expression and the effects of the clerk’s gender on the subsequent interaction between the clerk and customer. One hypothesis of this experiment was that a man’s facial expressions would have a diminishing effect on the perceived quality of the interaction compared to a woman’s facial expression. A second hypothesis was that a negative facial expression would have a diminishing effect on the perceived quality of the interaction, on the length of the interaction, and the possibility of a second interaction, compared to a positive facial expression. Participants viewed one of six photos of a retail clerk. The subjects viewed either a male clerk with either a positive, neutral, or negative facial expression, or a female clerk with either a positive, neutral, or negative facial expression, and were asked to rate the photos on various Likert scales. There were significant main effects for facial expression and gender, but no interaction effects.

Interactions occur everyday between people. Interactions that are face to face occur within the course of every person’s day. The effects of a person’s face upon meeting will have a profound effect on the subsequent conversation. A happy face may facilitate a good conversation, whereas a face that appears angry may facilitate a brief, bad conversation. A good or bad interaction between an existing employee and an existing customer of a retail establishment affects the flow of business at the establishment, as well as employee performance and evaluation. Any interaction between a clerk and a customer is at the heart of customer service, which is the backbone of retail. This proposal explored the effects of a supermarket clerk’s facial expression and the effects of the clerk’s gender on the subsequent interaction and the customer’s view of said interaction between the clerk and the customer.

Previous research has demonstrated numerous effects of facial expressions on social perceptions and interactions. A study by Coupland, Sustrik, Ting et al. (2004) showed that mood will affect the identification of facial emotions. A positive mood will more easily reflect a positive expression, whereas a negative mood will more easily reflect a negative expression. A study by D’Argenbeau, Comblain, Etienne, & Van der Linden (2003) showed that faces are better recognized when they appear happy as opposed to angry. Gabbott and Hogg (2000), however, showed that there is no effect of nonverbal communication (which would include facial expressions) on the customer. A study by Gladstone and Parker (2002) showed that a smile “was perhaps a facial ‘flag’ for an underlying propensity toward optimism (and even coping) – protecting against or reducing ‘negative emotionality.’” Furthermore, Gladstone and Parker found gender to moderate these facial expression effects. Previous research has also shown that a man’s expression will be rated as higher in anger than the equivalent expression of a woman (Plant, Hyde, Keltner, & Devine, 2000). Thayer and Schiff (1975) showed that expressions revealing anger have an effect on the estimation of time of an interaction, whereby time was overestimated. Rahman, Wilson, & Abrahams, (2004) showed that emotion can be detected more easily on the face of a male over the face of a female. Schnall and Laird (2003) showed that participants who practiced “happy” behavior (expression and posture) felt happier after the study had been completed, even after the behavior was no longer in practice.

The current study was designed to test several related hypotheses. First, a man’s negative facial expressions will have a diminishing effect on the perceived quality of the interaction compared to a woman’s facial expression. A second hypothesis was that a negative facial expression would have a diminishing effect on the perceived quality of the interaction, on the length of the interaction, and the possibility of a second interaction, compared to a positive facial expression. Participants viewed one of six photos of a retail clerk. The subjects viewed either a male clerk with either a positive, neutral, or negative facial expression, or a female clerk with either a positive, neutral, or negative facial expression, and were asked to rate the photos on various Likert scales. There were significant main effects for facial expression and gender, but no interaction effects.
decreasing effect on the possibility of a second interaction compared to a positive expression. That is, the subject will rate the possibility of a future interaction with the same clerk as lower for a negative facial expression than for a positive facial expression. The current study tested the above hypotheses by manipulating the facial expression of a hypothetical clerk (negative, positive, or neutral) and the gender of that clerk (male or female). The independent variables were the gender of the hypothetical supermarket clerk (male vs. female) and the facial expression of the hypothetical clerk (negative vs. positive vs. neutral). The dependent variables were the participants’ ratings of photos of clerks, focusing on quality and length of the interaction and possibility of a future interaction.

Method

Participants

Participants were 42 students from a northeastern public university recruited through volunteer sign-up sheets posted in the psychology department. The signup sheet described the experiment as follows: “This is a study designed to examine the effects of a cashier in a supermarket. It examines their gender and facial expression and its effects on YOU – the consumer.” Gender of the participants was not a factor in this experiment, and therefore there participant gender was not measured. Students were compensated with partial course credit or research credit, depending on their instructor.

Materials

The stimulus was one of six photos. Three photos were of a male clerk (with a positive expression, negative expression, and a neutral expression) and three photos were of a female clerk (with a positive expression, negative expression, and a neutral expression). A positive expression is defined as a happy face. A negative expression is defined as an angry face. A neutral expression is defined as a face with no apparent emotion. A scenario preceded the photo and a questionnaire and stated that the participant was a customer at a local supermarket about to make a merchandise return. The photo following the scenario featured a hypothetical clerk who had just finished helping the previous customer in line. The same questionnaire was attached to each of the 6 photos and involved questions about the clerk’s age, education, music interests, car, and three questions on a 6-point Likert scale asking the participants to rate the quality of the conversation, length of the conversation, and the possibility of a future interaction (see Appendix A for a sample of the questionnaire).

Procedure

The procedure was as follows: participants entered the room where the study was being held. The researcher introduced himself and explained that the study was examining the effects of a supermarket clerk’s gender and facial expression on the interaction between the clerk and the customer. The participants were given the informed consent and course credit forms and asked to fill them out. The participants were given 1 of the 6 photos, which was randomly assigned, along with the questionnaire, and asked to estimate the clerk’s age, level of education, music interests, and car. These questions were not used in the analysis of data and their only purpose was to get the subjects to pay close attention to the photos in order to rate them. The rest of the questionnaire included three Likert scale items, and participants were asked to rate the quality of the conversation, the length of the conversation, and the possibility of a second interaction between the same clerk and customer. Participants handed in their completed questionnaires and were thanked for their participation.

Results

The data were analyzed using three 2 X 3 between-subjects ANOVAs. Gender of the clerk had a significant effect on the perceived quality of the interaction between clerk and customer, $F(1, 41) = 27.8, p < .05$, and on the possibility of a future interaction between said clerk and customer, $F(1, 41) = 12.7, p < .05$. The perceived quality of the interaction between clerk and customer was rated higher for a female clerk ($M = 4.57, SD = 1.03$) than for a male clerk ($M = 3.14, SD = 1.01$). The perceived length of the interaction was rated higher for a female clerk ($M = 3.00, SD = 1.10$) than for a male clerk ($M = 2.62, SD = 1.12$). Finally, the possibility of a future interaction between customer and that same clerk was rated higher for a female clerk ($M = 4.33, SD = 1.43$) than for a male clerk ($M = 3.00, SD = 1.10$).

Facial expression had a significant effect on the perceived quality of the interaction between clerk and customer, $F(2, 41) = 9.0, p < .05$, and on the perceived length of the interaction between said clerk and customer, $F(2, 41) = 3.88, p < .05$, as well as on the possibility of a future interaction between said clerk and customer, $F(2, 41) = 3.52, p < .05$. No interactions were found in the current study. The perceived quality of the interaction between clerk and customer was rated higher for a positive facial expression ($M = 4.64, SD = 1.08$) than for a negative expression ($M = 3.64, SD = 1.28$) or a neutral expression ($M = 3.29, SD = .99$). The perceived length of the interaction between clerk and customer was rated higher for a positive facial expression ($M = 3.43, SD = 1.28$) than for a negative expression ($M = 2.64, SD = .93$) or a neutral expression ($M = 2.36, SD = .84$). Finally, the possibility of a future interaction between customer and that same clerk was rated higher for a positive facial expression ($M = 4.36, SD = 1.45$) than for a negative expression ($M = 3.43, SD = 1.40$) or a neutral expression ($M = 3.21, SD = 1.25$).

Discussion

The current study found that gender and facial expression of a retail clerk do have an effect on the customer. The researcher’s hypothesis was supported in that male clerks were rated lower for the perceived quality, perceived length, and the possibility of a future interaction than female clerks. This is in line with previous research by Rahman et al. (2004), which showed that emotion can be more easily detected on the face of a male than female. It is
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possible that participants saw a male clerk and assumed an angrier expression, even with a positive expression, than for a female clerk. With this in mind, males were rated lower than female clerks for the possibility of a future interaction. It is possible that if participants saw a male clerk and rated him lower for an expression they saw as angrier than a female’s, they would be less inclined to approach the male clerk in the future. The researcher’s hypothesis was also supported in that negative facial expressions were rated lower for the perceived quality, perceived length, and the possibility of a future interaction than positive facial expressions. This is in line with previous research by Gladstone and Parker (2002) that said that a smile was a “flag” for an inclination towards optimism. It is possible that participants saw a negative expression and rated it lower because they sensed some pessimism in the clerk, and a more positive expression aroused optimism. An interaction would be rated with higher quality if the clerk was smiling. Furthermore, a smile would also indicate a longer interaction, such that the customer and clerk would spend more time interacting in the store than if the clerk was not smiling. Finally, a smile would encourage the customer to approach the clerk in the future, because they know the clerk is optimistic and can effectively solve their problems.

There are a few limitations to this study. The number of participants is one limitation, as more participants would have provided better significance. Also, the photos of the clerks were presented in black and white to the participants, and color photos may have better exemplified the expressions on the clerks’ faces. Another limitation of this study is that there was no manipulation check. That is, the researcher never asked the participants what facial expression they perceived in the photos. One other limitation is that the researcher never collected data on the gender of the participants, therefore never collecting data on how males or females rated male and female clerks or how males and females rated facial expressions. A final limitation to the study is that the male and female chosen to represent the retail clerk may not have been equally attractive to the participants. One improvement would be to have participants rate the attractiveness of the clerks so that data could be used to explain differences, if any.

While gender cannot be controlled for employment at a retail establishment (as it is impossible to predict who will be placed into a higher position of customer service nor should it be), the gender of a clerk does have a profound effect on how the customer reacts to the service situation. Females were rated higher than males. However, one thing that can be controlled is facial expression. A facial expression has profound effects on the service situation. Smiling will have a greater positive effect than a face that shows anger, confusion, displeasure, etc. Retail businesses should take this knowledge into consideration when training new employees in the customer service field. A smile could go a long way to determining whether or not an establishment will hold a loyal customer base.

References


Gladstone, G., & Parker, G. (2002). When you’re smiling does the whole world smile for you? Australasian Psychiatry, 10, 144-146.


Appendix A

You are a customer at a local supermarket. You have a merchandise return to take care of at the customer service desk. Alan/Sally has just finished helping the customer in line before you. This is how he appears when you approach him.

What age do you estimate Alan/Sally to be?

What level of education do you think Alan/Sally has reached?
What kind of music do you think Alan/Sally listens to?

a. Classical
b. Rock
c. Heavy metal
d. Rap

What kind of car do you think Alan/Sally drives?

a. Mini Cooper
b. Saturn
c. BMW
d. Ferrari

Please rate what you think the quality of the interaction between you and Alan/Sally will be, with 1 being a poor quality interaction and 6 being an excellent interaction. Quality is defined as good customer service, the solution to the customer’s problem, and a good verbal exchange between the clerk and the customer.

1 2 3 4 5 6

Please rate what you think the length of time of the interaction between you and Alan/Sally will be, with 1 being a short interaction and 6 being a long interaction.

1 2 3 4 5 6

Please rate what you think the likelihood of you approaching Alan/Sally again in the future for a second interaction will be, with 1 being very unlikely and 6 being very likely.

1 2 3 4 5 6