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The Effects of a Sales Clerk's Smile on Consumer Perceptions and Behaviors

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ABSTRACT

Research supports the positive effect of smiling and other positive emotional displays on a sales encounter. This 2 x 2 x 2 ANOVA design explored the effect of smiling in isolation of other nonverbal displays as it interacts with sex of sales clerk and sex of participant on consumer perceptions and behaviors. Male participant behavior and ratings of the clerk were more influenced by a smiling female sales clerk or a nonsmiling male sales clerk. No significant effects for facial expression were found for female participants however, they rated the product and the sales clerk more positively if it was a male sales clerk. While the overall impression of the smiling individual, regardless of sex, was more positive than when displaying a neutral expression, it was not a significant mediator of the effects of a smiling facial expression on consumer perceptions and behaviors.

INTRODUCTION

Smiling is a significant nonverbal signal in a sales encounter between sales clerk and consumer. A sales clerk's smile should result in more positive impressions of the clerk and his/her sales pitch, and influence the consumer's purchasing behavior. Service encounters are typified as social relationships because they involve communicative processing and expression. As such, which emotions should or should not be conveyed

between a sales clerk and the consumer are dictated by widely held and accepted norms (Mattila, Grandey, & Fisk, 2003). Sales could be characterized as requiring a cheerful disposition including the smile as a universal and accepted display of positive emotion, and skill in uttering social amenities, regardless of the sincerity of the clerk or their actual feelings (Mattila et al., 2003). An extreme example of this requirement is an increasingly popular cosmetic surgery “makeover,” including dental work, to achieve a naturally occurring smile (Gilbert, 2003). Further, smiling is contagious and consumers may likewise respond with a smile making them feel more positive about the service encounter, the sales clerk’s pitch and increasing overall satisfaction (Howard & Gengler, 2001). Whereas, female consumers are less satisfied with a sales encounter than males when the sales clerk displays negative emotions, both men and women appear more satisfied when the sales clerk displays a positive emotional cue such as a smile (Tan, Foo, & Kwek, 2004).

A smiling facial expression is associated with more positive attributes such as sociability, sincerity, and competence (Abel & Watters, 2005; Frances, 1979; LaFrance & Hecht, 1995; Lau, 1982; Mueser, Grau, Sussman, & Rosen, 1984; Reis et al., 1990). Further, formation of an attitude by the consumer towards a sales clerk can be influenced by suspicion of the motives behind the sales clerk’s message which may be alleviated by the clerk’s smile (DeCarlo, 2005). A smiling sales clerk might convey a more helpful perception to the consumer, which would lead the consumer to be more positively disposed to the sales pitch (DeCarlo, 2005). Therefore, a sales clerk’s smile should increase the consumers’ perceived credibility of a sales clerk, and increase the consumer’s positive response to the clerk’s sales pitch (Woodside & Davenport, 1974).

While some studies have found an association between smiling and positive attributes, other studies have found smiling related to less independence and strength (Reis, et al., 1990), less toughmindedness (Frances, 1979), and less expertise and trustworthiness (Kratz & Marshall, 1988). Furthermore, Keating et al. (1981) found that a nonsmiling face was most often selected as a “dominant” face across several cultures. Finally, numerous studies revealed that smiling was associated with increased ratings on femininity and decreased ratings on masculinity (Halberstadt & Saitta, 1987; Kratz & Marshall, 1988; LaFrance & Carmen, 1980; Reis et al., 1990). And as Reis et al. (1990) suggested, “. . .because masculinity is traditionally associated with a dispassionate orientation, the warmth generated by a smile would have a negative effect for males” (p. 265). The association of femininity with smiling is further supported by the numerous studies revealing that women smile more than men (Hall, 1984, 1998; LaFrance, 2002; LaFrance & Hecht, 2000). Furthermore, men appear to be particularly sensitive to monitoring their emotional displays so they are socially desirable and congruent with the male stereotype (Leary, 1995) especially in the presence of other men (Smith, Noll, & Bryant, 1999), whereas women have the freedom to express any and all emotions (Kring & Gordon, 1998).

While sex appears to affect the degree of facial expressiveness, it also influences how the receiver responds. Hall (1984) found that people were more likely to smile at women than men and, women smile more at other women than men smile at other men.

Hinsz and Tomhave (1991) also found that women were equally likely to smile or frown at both the men and women whereas, men were two times more likely to smile at the women than men and more likely to frown at men than women. Overall, men responded with less positive and more negative expressions to the men. Consequently, positive effects of a sales clerk's smile on consumer behavior may well be dependent on the clerk's sex as well as the sex of the consumer.

Since the 1700s, researchers have observed that people tend to "catch" someone else's emotions and to feel what others around them are feeling, subsequently defined as "emotional contagion" (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993). Hatfield et al. (1993) suggest this mimicry can occur almost instantaneously and without conscious awareness. However, there are individual differences in the degree to which people are affected by others' emotional expressions (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994). Not only does research suggest that women are more emotionally expressive, but also women appear more accurate at reading nonverbal cues than men (Hall, 1978; Hall, Carter, & Horgan, 2000). Further, women appear to be more susceptible to emotional contagion than men (Doherty, Orimoto, Singelis, Hatfield, & Hebb, 1995). Hatfield et al. (1994) suggest these results are primarily due to gender roles where women are socialized to be more sensitive to the emotional displays of others.

Several field studies have been conducted on the effects of positive emotional displays. Tidd and Lockard's (1978) study revealed larger tips given to a waitress with a broad smile than with a minimal smile. Gueguen and De Gail (2003) also found that randomly selected passersby were more willing to help a second confederate after confronting the first confederate who was smiling versus a confederate who was not smiling. They suggested that smiling by the first confederate activated a positive mood in the participant subsequently leading to more helping behavior toward the second confederate, related to positive emotional contagion. Additional studies have examined the impact of "emotional labor" in retail businesses (Morris & Feldman, 1996) and positive emotional displays on customer satisfaction and ratings of service quality, attitudes toward products, and purchasing behavior (Brown & Sulzer-Azaroff, 1994; Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Donovan, Rossiter, Marcoolyn, & Nesdale, 1994; Howard & Gengler, 2001; Pugh, 2001; Rafaeli, 1989; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987; Tan et al., 2004; Tsai, 2001).

Brown and Sulzer-Azaroff (1994), Pugh (2001), and Tan, et al. (2004) revealed that employee positive emotional displays were related to customer satisfaction and more positive evaluations of service quality. Further, Taylor and Baker (1994) and Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1996) found that customer satisfaction and positive evaluations of service quality were related to greater willingness to return and willingness to recommend the business to others. Other research by Donovan et al. (1994) and Donovan and Rossiter (1982) suggest that customers' positive emotions were linked to purchasing behavior, amount of time spent in the store, liking of the store, and willingness to return to the store and recommend the store to their friends. Finally, Tsai (2001) revealed that employee positive emotions (e.g. smiling in addition to greetings, thanking, eye contact, and overall friendliness) were related to the customers' greater willingness to visit the

store again and pass complimentary comments about the store to the friends. Tsai (2001), however, did not find a relationship with the customers' purchasing decision. Tsai (2001) suggested that emotional contagion was at work. Customers "caught" the positive emotions displayed by employees leading to customer satisfaction and ultimately influencing their behavior. One downside of Tsai's (2001) study is that he controlled for the sex of clerk and sex of consumer without examining them as variables influencing the results.

Hiring the right employee for the job is primarily driven by cultural norms, with the sex of the employee implied in those norms (Steinberg & Figart, 1999). With the perception that women are friendlier and smile more, they are more likely to be hired in organizations in which friendliness is emphasized as in sales. Consequently, this "investment" in emotional labor recognizes sex differences in hiring of employees because of the value placed on execution of emotional labor with customers (Steinberg & Figart, 1999), and consumers may well be more receptive to "smiling" female sales clerks as a cultural norm.

Purpose of the Study

Research on employee positive emotions have been conducted in the field by measuring not only smiling but also other nonverbal and verbal factors such as eye contact, greetings, and thanking customers. No previous study has examined the influence of the "smile" in isolation of these other positive emotional expressions. In addition, no research has examined the interaction between sex of sales clerk and sex of consumer. If women are more susceptible to emotional contagion (Doherty et al., 1995), perhaps female consumers would be more affected by a clerk's positive emotional displays than male consumers. However, this difference between female and male consumers may be dependent upon the sex of the sales clerk expressing the positive emotions as suggested by research on sex differences in emotional displays (Hall, 1984; Hinsz & Tomhave, 1991). Therefore, in this study, we expected that female consumers would be more receptive to both a male and female sales clerk who was smiling than if not smiling. We also expected male consumers to be more responsive to a smiling versus nonsmiling female sales clerk, and yet more receptive to a nonsmiling versus smiling male sales clerk based on cultural norms of women smiling more than men. Finally, we explored whether impression formation via type of facial expression would mediate any effects for facial expression on consumer perceptions and behavior. In sum, we designed this study to isolate the effects of the "smile" as a positive emotional display when interacting with sex of consumer and sex of sales clerk on consumers' perceptions of the product and clerk and their consumer behavior.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 71 male and 79 female undergraduate students from a southeastern regional comprehensive university, voluntarily recruited from psychology

courses for course credit. Average age was 19.97 years ($SD = 2.19$) and 69% of the sample were first-year or second-year students.

Stimulus Materials

Photographs used in the study included a Caucasian male and Caucasian female displaying either a smile or a neutral expression. Therefore, four photographs were used in this study: (1) a woman displaying a smile, (2) the same woman displaying a neutral expression, (3) a man displaying a smile, and (4) the same man displaying a neutral expression. These photos depicted the individuals from the shoulders up similar to a “mug” shot with the same type and color of clothing and same background.

A scenario used in the study described Chris (the person in the photograph) as a salesperson at a prominent audio/visual store and included a detailed sales pitch that Chris gave about a car radio system. (See Appendix A.) A picture of the system was provided at the top of the sales pitch. The name “Chris” was chosen because of its gender-neutrality allowing use of both sets of pictures.

Procedure

Participants signed consent forms and were tested in small groups. The participants received one of the four possible pictures of an individual. After the participants examined the picture, they rated the person on 15 different bipolar adjectives on a 12-point scale including: unattractive-attractive, unfriendly-friendly, unlikeable-likeable, phony-genuine, insincere-sincere, unsocial-sociable, unassertive-assertive, submissive-dominant, untrustworthy-trustworthy, incompetent-competent, self-conscious-self-assured, lackadaisical-ambitious, lazy-hardworking, abrasive-charming, and unhappy-happy. Positive and negative adjectives were randomly ordered so that not all positive traits were to one side of the pole. Participants were required to first rate the person on these adjectives in order to engage the participants in impression formation before identifying the person as a sales clerk, reading the sales pitch scenario, and completing questions related to their consumer perceptions and purchasing behaviors. After looking at the picture and rating the individual on the adjectives, they read the individual’s sales pitch scenario and rated statements using a 12-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = not at all to 12 = extremely). Six statements of primary interest included likelihood of buying this product or other products from Chris which was combined into an average measure of purchasing behavior; recommending the stereo to a friend and desirability of the product which was combined into an average measure of product rating; and ratings on the effectiveness of Chris’ sales pitch and how knowledgeable Chris was about the stereo which was combined into an average rating of Chris as a sale’s clerk. After the participants completed the questionnaire, they were thanked for their participation and debriefed.

RESULTS

An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine the effects of smiling and sex of sales clerk on male and female participants' purchasing behavior. A significant 3-way interaction was found, $F(1, 141) = 6.18, p < .05, \eta^2 = .04$. The 3-way interaction was decomposed by examining the smiling versus neutral condition by sex of sales clerk interaction separately for male and female participants. For male participants, the smiling condition by sex of sales clerk was significant, $F(1, 67) = 5.14, p < .05, \eta^2 = .07$. As displayed in Table 1, male participants were more likely to purchase the stereo or other products from a male sales clerk with a neutral facial expression than when smiling; in contrast, male participants more likely to purchase the stereo from a female sales clerk if she was smiling than if she was not smiling. No significant interaction between smiling and sex of sales clerk or main effects were found for female participants on purchasing behavior.

Table 1

Mean Ratings of Male Participants by Condition

	Male Sales Clerk		Female Sales Clerk	
	Smiling ^a	Neutral ^b	Smiling ^c	Neutral ^d
Purchasing behavior	6.85	7.68	7.89	6.29
Sales clerk ratings	7.25	8.37	7.50	6.00

Note. Higher scores (range from 1 – 12) represent greater likelihood in engaging in the behavior and more positive perceptions of the sales clerk.

^an = 20. ^bn = 19. ^cn = 18. ^dn = 14.

No significant interactions were found for the product rating variable. However, significant main effects existed for sex of participant and sex of sales clerk. Female participants gave higher ratings, ($M = 8.58, SD = 1.70$), than male participants, ($M = 7.13, SD = 2.48$), about the product, $F(1, 141) = 20.13, p < .01, \eta^2 = .13$. Further, participants reported higher ratings about the product when the sales clerk was a man, ($M = 8.16, SD = 2.02$), than a woman, ($M = 7.59, SD = 2.40$), $F(1, 141) = 4.34, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$.

A significant 3-way interaction was found in the ratings of Chris as a sales clerk, $F(1, 141) = 8.11, p < .01, \eta^2 = .05$. As before, the interaction was decomposed by examining the smiling versus neutral condition by sex of sales clerk interaction separately for male and female participants. For male participants, the smiling condition by sex of sales clerk interaction was significant, $F(1, 67) = 9.47, p < .01, \eta^2 = .12$. As displayed in Table 1, male participants reported more positive ratings as a sales clerk if the sales pitch

came from a male sales clerk with a neutral facial expression than when smiling; in contrast, more positive ratings were given by male participants if the sales pitch came from a female sales clerk who was smiling than if not smiling. No significant interaction between smiling and sex of sales clerk existed for female participants, however, female participants gave more positive ratings for a male sales clerk ($M = 9.39$, $SD = 1.66$) than a female sales clerk ($M = 8.51$, $SD = 1.62$), $F(1, 74) = 5.83$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .07$. No significant effect of facial expression was revealed in ratings of the sales clerk by female participants.

Mediation effects of impression formation on facial expression

A focus of this study was to examine whether impression formation via facial expression would mediate the effects for facial expression on consumer purchasing behavior and perceptions of the product and sales clerk. Participants initially rated “Chris” on 15 different bipolar adjectives before identifying Chris as a sales clerk and then answering questions related to their purchasing behavior and perceptions of the product and the sales clerk. These ratings were designed to encourage impression formation prior to completing these questions. A composite measure for impression was computed by averaging the 15 bipolar adjectives after reverse scoring the negative items, so that a higher score indicated a more positive impression. The Cronbach alpha for the combined measure was .82 indicating acceptable internal reliability. An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was first conducted to examine the effects of smiling and sex of the individual on male and female participants’ composite impression of the person. No significant interactions were found, however a significant main effect for facial expression, $F(1, 138) = 14.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$, revealed a more positive impression for Chris who was smiling, ($M = 7.95$, $SD = 1.05$) than Chris with a neutral facial expression ($M = 6.86$, $SD = 1.22$).

A series of Analyses of Covariance (ANCOVA) were conducted to partial out the impression of Chris to determine whether the impression variable mediated the effects of facial expression previously found interacting with sex of participant and sex of sales clerk on purchasing behavior and ratings of Chris as a sales clerk. According to Reis (1982), cancellation of an effect when partialing out another variable, supports a mediation effect. The impression variable was not a significant covariate and therefore did not mediate the effect of facial expression on purchasing behavior ($p = .14$) or ratings of Chris as a sales clerk ($p = .10$). Therefore, the previous results remained intact and suggest that the impression manipulation did not significantly influence the effects of facial expression when interacting with sex of participant and sex of sales clerk on purchasing behavior or rating of the sales clerk.

DISCUSSION

We designed this study to isolate the effects of the “smile” as a positive emotional display on consumers’ behavior and their perceptions of the product and sales clerk. A more positive impression of the person before identified as a sales clerk, was found regardless of sex when the individual portrayed a smiling vs. neutral facial expression,

supporting results from previous studies (Abel & Watters, 2005; Frances, 1979; LaFrance & Hecht, 1995; Lau, 1982; Mueser et al., 1984; Reis et al., 1990). However, the positive impression based on a smiling facial expression did not mediate any effects of facial expression on consumer perceptions and behavior. These results suggest that a sales clerk's smile can have significant effects on consumers beyond the simple formation of a positive impression associated with the smile. Further, any positive impression associated with the smile may be mitigated when the individual is subsequently labeled as a "sales clerk."

Contrary to our expectations, female participants' perceptions of the product and sales clerk, and their consumer behaviors were not influenced by the smiling facial expression as would be expected by previous research suggesting that women are most susceptible to emotional contagion (Doherty et al., 1995). Female participants were, however, influenced by sex of the sales clerk. Female participants rated the male sales clerk more positively than the female sales clerk regardless of facial expression. Furthermore, both male and female participants rated the product more positively if the sales clerk was a man than if a woman. Considering these results, it is possible that the type of product (car stereo system) may have been viewed as more "male/masculine" by female participants and influenced the null effects of facial expression.

As expected, male participants' perceptions of the sales clerks and their behaviors were affected by the smiling facial expression with the effect dependent upon the sex of the sales clerk. The male participant purchasing behavior was most influenced by either a smiling female sales clerk or a nonsmiling male sales clerk. Male participants were most likely to purchase the product or other products from the clerk if the sales pitch came from a smiling female sales clerk or a nonsmiling male sales clerk. The significant effect for a nonsmiling male sales clerk on male participants is interesting and worthy of speculation. It is possible that male participants were more wary of a smiling male sales clerk because men in general do not smile as often as women (Hall, 1984, 1998; LaFrance, 2002; LaFrance & Hecht, 2000). As DeCarlo (2005) suggests, a consumer's attitude toward a sales clerk can be influenced when suspicion of the sales clerk's motives is aroused. This consumer suspicion can be made less salient by behaviors of the sales clerk such as smiling which may resolve that suspicion. However, a male sales clerk's smile may work in reverse for male consumers and increase their suspicion rather than alleviate it. Furthermore, as previous research suggests, smiling is associated with increased ratings on femininity and decreased ratings on masculinity (Halberstadt & Saitta, 1987; Kratz & Marshall, 1988; LaFrance & Carmen, 1980; Reis et al., 1990). Therefore, male consumers may be more receptive to a nonsmiling male sales clerk as indicated by more positive ratings of a male clerk displaying a neutral facial expression than when smiling. In contrast, male participants were quite receptive to a smiling female sales clerk in both purchasing behavior and perceptions of the clerk's effectiveness and knowledge. These results support previous research that men are more responsive to smiles from women than smiles from men (Hinsz & Tomhave, 1991).

Overall, this study suggests that a male or female sales clerk's smiling facial expression may differentially influence the perceptions and purchasing behavior of male

consumers beyond the influence of any impression of the clerk based on his/her smile. In contrast, the female consumer may not be differentially influenced by a smiling facial expression, at least when presented with a sales pitch about a product as used in this study. Future research should consider a range of products that are more gender-neutral in nature to examine whether these results can be replicated. Finally, this study was limited by its laboratory setting and use of photographs in the experimental paradigm. Further research using field setting observations could test whether these results generalize to real life settings.

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APPENDIX A

Chris' Detailed Sales Pitch

Hi! My name is Chris. This is an amazing Kenwood CD-Radio for your car, so you can listen to your favorite CD's on the road. This striking receiver brings some flash to your dash with its 3-D high-resolution display and cutting-edge cosmetics. And it backs up its looks with these great features; this unit uses Kenwood's CR-2 tuner for clear radio reception, even for those far away stations that can be so hard to pick up. You know how annoying it is to only be able to hear constant commercials. That's why they included 6 station preset buttons, so you can program your favorite stations, and not having to scan to find the music you want to hear. Other features include a digital clock, AM / FM capability, and anti-shock and anti-skip technology so you avoid annoying repeats. You know you get tired of those constant skips during your favorite tune. This CD player will play all your CD-R and CD-RW discs. A Dynamic Bass Boost capability allows you to pump 100 watts to four different speakers. Five equalizer settings are also programmed into memory, each with its own bass, middle, and treble level settings. This allows you to recall the best preset for different music types – from Jazz to Rap. Five different color choices are available for the detachable, fold-down display: red, white, green, blue, or purple. Another option is a wireless remote that comes with this Kenwood, and for those

of you who lose little things in your car, there is a button on the display which activates a beeper in the remote so you can track it down. If you decide later that you also want to add a CD-changer in your car, you can even work it from our display. And with a three year parts and labor warranty, you won't have to worry about replacing it any time soon.