



Guests' Perceptions of Hospitality Employees' Non-Verbal Behavior: Insights from a Restaurant Sector

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INSIGHTS FROM A RESTAURANT SECTOR

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Introduction and Background

Excellent interpersonal skills are commonly seen as a necessary component of an effective hospitality employee's skill set (Chung-Herrera, Enz, & Lankau, 2003; Gross et al., 2017). High quality guest-employee interactions contribute or, in some instances, may constitute customer satisfaction (Sparks & Callan, 1992), increasing the probability of a repeat visit and positive word of mouth. Therefore, successful businesses, including those in hospitality, put much effort into training their employees on the proper ways to communicate with customers. However, besides verbal, communication occurring during a service encounter necessarily includes a non-verbal component, an academically under-researched and practically under-emphasized aspect of employee-customer interaction. Unlike verbal cues, nonverbal communication consists of subtle cues and signs which a customer expectedly detect and make a meaning from (Burgoon *et al.*, 1990). Conventionally, non-verbal communication, or behavior, is conceptualized as comprised of (1) kinesics (or body behavior: e.g. nodding, smiling, eye contact), (2) proxemics (or distance maintenance), (3) physical appearance (e.g. uniform, hairstyle), and (4) paralanguage (or vocal behavior: e.g. tone of voice) (Gabbott & Hogg, 2001; Jung & Yoon, 2011; Sundaram & Webster, 2000).

Existing literature in services management and marketing acknowledges the role of non-verbal communication. Lin & Lin (2011) advocate the use of non-verbal cue to transmit positive emotions from service employees to customers, while Gabott and Hogg (2000) demonstrate the effect of service providers' non-verbal behavior on service quality evaluation by customers. In the hospitality context, Jung and Yoon (2011) report that kinesics and proxemics have significant

effects on customer positive emotions, whereas kinesics and paralanguage affect restaurant patrons' satisfaction. In another instance, Yuksel, (2008) shows that restaurant employees exhibiting certain non-verbal cues are perceived as more competent and trustworthy. Although valuable, these studies do not provide a deeper understanding of how customers experience or perceive non-verbal behavior of service personnel. Therefore, the study sets a broad objective to explore customer' perceptions of nonverbal behavior of restaurant employees, by considering the four groups of non-verbal communication: kinesics, proxemics, paralanguage, and physical appearance. With this, the research is expected to contribute to the hospitality industry by developing nonverbal communication competencies, or inventory, to be used as goals in employee training (see Figure 1).

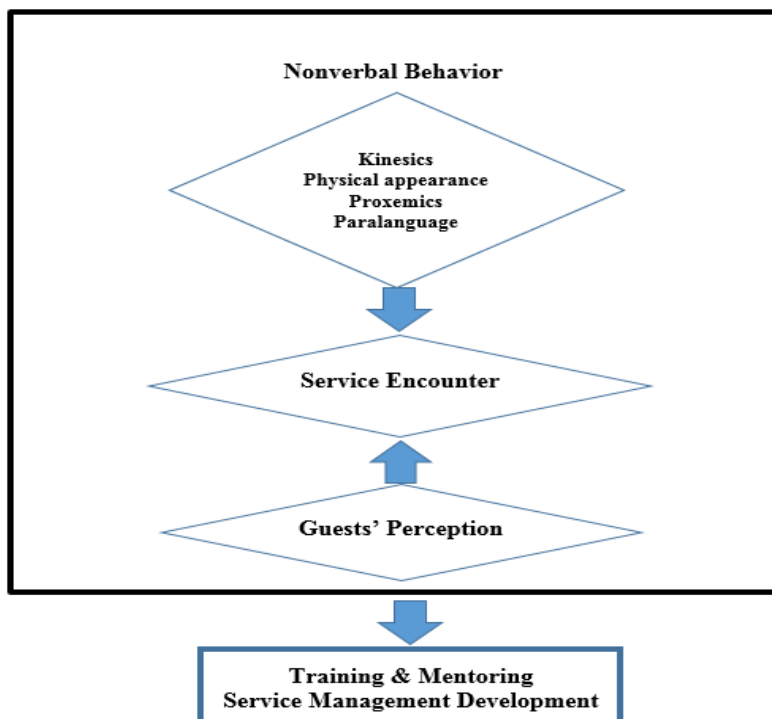


Figure 1. The Study Framework

Method

A qualitative approach is used to address the research objective, and 30-35 participants are recruited using a snowball sampling until data saturation is achieved. Participants are Hong Kong residents who visit restaurants of various types at least twice a week. Participants are asked to share their impressions on the recent restaurants visits, with the following prompts: (1) Please share a couple of memorable restaurant visits with us? (2) What made it so memorable? (3) What you have observed there, what you felt? (4) With what nonverbal cues you were comfortable/uncomfortable? (5) What cues are most memorable, why? All interviews are audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The first and second authors analyze the data independently and jointly following the “theoretical” thematic analysis procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and as guided by the study’s framework of four types of non-verbal behavior.

Preliminary Results and Conclusion

This research is ongoing; however, some preliminary results can be shared. In general, restaurant guests tend to pay great attention to personnel’s non-verbal cues at various points of dining experiences (e.g. being greeted, ordering a menu item, being directed to a washroom). Kinesics and paralanguage seem types of non-verbal communication most obvious to guests’ perception. Kinesics cues such as eye contact and facial expressions (e.g. a smile) are mostly commonly mentioned when discussing most memorable or worst dining experiences: “They were not smiling. They were looking rude. If they smiled at us, I would feel like at home” (Interviewee 6). Paralanguage of restaurant staff when speaking slow and in quite voice tended to be perceived favorably. In fact, even when no actual service failure occurs, restaurant personal exhibiting unfavorable cues are perceived as untrained. A more nuanced understanding of

proxemics and physical appearance as perceived by restaurant guests is anticipated at the completion of this study.

Aside from supplementing existing hospitality literature with qualitative insights into consumer perception of non-verbal cues, this research is hoped to draw hospitality businesses' attention to the importance of personnel's non-verbal behavior in delivering memorable and satisfying dining experiences to their guests.

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