



# The effects of nonverbal communication of employees in the family restaurant upon customers' emotional responses and customer satisfaction

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand interrelationships among customers' perception of nonverbal communication, customers' emotional responses and customer satisfaction in the family restaurant. A total of 333 customers in Korea participated. The results showed that employees' kinesics and proxemics among nonverbal communications have a significant effect on customers' positive emotions, while employees' kinesics and paralanguage affect customers' negative emotions. Also, it was found that whether customers feel positive or negative determines their satisfaction. Limitations and future research directions are also discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

In case of service-oriented companies like restaurants, employees play their role while performing bilateral communication by direct face-to-face contact with customers. Therefore employees' communication skills are a barometer for successful management (George, 1993; Wolvin, 1994), and thus companies have made a lot of efforts to induce employees to communicate in an efficient manner. Therefore, the service company makes many efforts to boost interaction between its employees and customers. In particular, communication is important in interaction between an employee and a customer (Sparks and Callan, 1992), because the service provider's communication style plays a very important role in deciding the customer's satisfaction in cases of close interaction between them in providing service (Rafaelli, 1993). Communication between a service provider and a customer during a transaction is divided into verbal and nonverbal communications. The former, a major information delivery channel, means to choose and deliver words with obvious intention. On the other hand, the latter includes the facial expression, appearance and posture shown by the employee to the customer and, along with language, provides crucial clues for situations where information is delivered and the customer has to interpret it (Burgoon et al., 1990; Chandon et al., 1997). In particular, nonverbal communication plays a large part in the customer's favorable appraisal of the quality of the service provided (Sundaram and Webster, 2000). Mehrabian and Williams (1969) said that 93% of communication was nonverbal and Barnum and Wolniansky (1989) noted that more than 70%

of communication between people was possible through nonverbal methods. When a situation occurs in which the limitation of language expressions makes it impossible for people to deliver emotions sufficiently, they often have to figure out others' emotions or deliver their intention through nonverbal clues (Stiff et al., 1994). In other words, a language is essential to human's communication process, but this process also includes nonverbal aspects, which in particular narrow psychological distance between customers and employees and help them to smoothly communicate with language (Sundaram and Webster, 2000). Such nonverbal communication applies to both the customer and the employee because, for more precise delivery of messages, it is more effective to use nonverbal communication methods such as posture, facial expression and gestures in addition to language expressions (Gabbott and Hogg, 2001). An employee's use of proper nonverbal communication methods during a transaction significantly influences his or her relationship with the customer (Burgoon et al., 1990), and the former's nonverbal communicational style reduces problems or conflicts occurring in the service delivery process and greatly affects customer satisfaction (Anderson and Narus, 1990). Therefore, when a service provider tries to deliver positive messages to a customer, the non-communication clues of the former also should be positive, and he or she should figure out the customer's psychological aspects underlying nonverbal communication elements by properly using nonverbal communication elements. Therefore, in marketing, it is very important to examine nonverbal communication, and in particular, in a service encounter where the customer and the employee interact.

Based on the importance of nonverbal communication, many socio-psychological studies on non-communication have been carried out so far (Hargie et al., 1987; Giles and Robinson, 1991; Delmonte, 1991), but those performed in marketing have been few (Gabbott and Hogg, 2000; Sundaram and Webster, 2000).

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In particular, service touch-points have a feature of face to face interactions between customers and employees in service situations and this feature makes employees' communication decisively affect customers' emotions and consumption (Solomon et al., 1985). The effect of employees' communication on customers' emotional reactions in actual service situations as such can be explained by the emotional contagion theory which suggests that in interactions between two persons, the emotional state of a person affects the other person's emotion meaning that emotional contagion occurs in the process of interpersonal communications (Verbeke, 1997; Pugh, 2001; Lundqvist, 2008). In other words, Schoenewolf (1990) suggested that the emotional expressions provided by employees would be delivered to customers to make customers have emotional states similar to those of employees. Consequently, since, in the process of personal interactions, the expression of a person's emotion or grasping others' emotions becomes possible only through communications, employees' communication would induce a phenomenon of sympathy where customers' emotions coincide with employees' emotions. It can be said that by this mechanism, customers become to grasp part of employees' emotions through verbal and nonverbal communications provided by employees thereby experiencing positive or negative emotions (Tsai and Huang, 2002). This eventually indicates that employees' expression of favorable emotions may promote customers' experience of positive emotions. Due to the phenomenon of emotional contagion, a large part of consumption experiences at service touch-points becomes to be based on interactions with service providers and therefore, it can be said that management of the quality of interactions is very important in terms of management. In terms of this emotional contagion theory, Elizur (1987) mentioned that employees' communication would affect the emotions experienced by customers at service touch-points and this would in turn affect customers' behaviors and Sommers et al. (1989) and Sundaram and Webster (2000) stated that employees' communication methods would induce customers' favorable emotional reactions in service situations. However, their studies can be said to have just suggested those relationships without verifying customers' emotional reactions in detail.

In particular, there has been no study on family restaurants as a representative people-industry in which communication between employees and customers is very important. In addition, when a service is provided, the interactive relationship between employees and customers is a social relationship, and in the process, customers experience emotions for certain reasons and sometimes use their emotions to obtain what they want. In other words, customers make an emotional response through verbal and nonverbal communications with service providers; emotions are not personal, but have social aspects which can be explained in a social context. Therefore, this study views that a customer's emotions are a result of the interaction between people in social relations, and attempts to verify how nonverbal communication between customers and employees affects the former's positive or negative emotions and to examine how employees' nonverbal communication affects customer satisfaction.

## 2. Literature review and conceptual model

### 2.1. Nonverbal communication

Nonverbal communication is communication using methods other than language (Jandt, 2001), expressing emotions and delivering postures without language expressions (Argyle, 1975). Scholars' definitions of nonverbal communication widely vary, but most agree that it means using all communication methods other than language. For example, Miller et al. (1967) said that nonver-

bal communication was closely related to intentional behaviors, Samover et al. (1981) that it was stimuli with the form of messages other than language in communication, and Dodd (1982) that it was a communication to express intentions using gestures, time and space. In communication in general, and service provision in particular, nonverbal communication plays a large part because the communicator cannot perfectly express what he or she intends to deliver with verbal communication alone. Birdwhistell (1952) also concluded that 65% or more of human communication was delivered in nonverbal forms and only 35% in verbal forms, and Delmonte (1991) said that nonverbal communication delivered more meanings than verbal communication in a more exact manner. Ruesch and Kees (1956) divided elements of nonverbal communication into sign, action and object languages, and Harisson (1974) into performancial, artificial, contextual and mediatory codes. Based on Sundaram and Webster (2000)'s study, this study divided traits of nonverbal communication into kinesics such as gestures; proxemics, which means appropriate space necessary for communication; paralanguage, such as voice and way and speed of talking and physical appearance, such as physical attractiveness, clothes and hairstyles. Kinesics was systemized in detail by Birdwhistell (1952), and it means communication behaviors of expressing opinions with symbols of eyesight, gestures and postures (Argyle, 1994). A service provider's gestures or postures may then be clues with which a customer grasps that the former is attentive and sincere (Knapp, 1980; Sundaram and Webster, 2000). Proxemics means appropriate space necessary for communication between an employee and a customer. Examining when the customer notices the approaching employee shows that an appropriate distance, not too far away or too close, should be maintained. Burgoon et al. (1990)'s study discovered that appropriate distance between an employee and a customer resulted in the customer's favorable evaluation of the company. Paralanguage studies diverse sounds from humans other than formal languages, forms the basis for grasping the intensity of content and emotional state through pseudo-languages and affects customers' degree of understanding and employee's persuasion (Burgoon, 1979; Argyle, 1983). Physical appearance means physical attractiveness and clothes. As physical attractiveness of employees, which is perceived by customers, is closely related to customer satisfaction of services, companies tend to favor better-looking employees (Koernig and Page, 2002; Söderlund and Julander, 2009). Particularly in the case of a restaurant whose employees come into face-to-face contact with customers, an attractive physical appearance of employees is considered positive for corporate performance, as better-looking staffs have more traits needed for the business (Hurley-Hanson and Giannantonio, 2006).

### 2.2. Relationship between nonverbal communication and emotional response

In one of the major studies on nonverbal communication and the positive emotion of customers, Sundaram and Webster (2000) explained that customers recognizing nonverbal communication of employees positively tended to experience positive emotions, Burgoon et al. (1990) explained that kinesic behaviors of employees, such as attitudes or gestures, produced positive emotions if considered positive by customers. In addition, Price et al. (1995) also argued that in terms of proxemics in relation to nonverbal communications, service providers should maintain appropriate distances from customers in service situations to positively affect customers' emotions. Also, Lang et al. (1993) asserted that customers' perception of employees' appearance was directly related to the former's positive emotions, and Mehrabian and Blum (1997) suggested that the more positively customers recognized physical attractiveness of employees, the more favorable their emotional

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