The depicted service employee in marketing communications: An empirical assessment of the impact of facial happiness

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

Employees are often depicted in service firms’ marketing communications material. This study examines one particular aspect of such depictions: the signaling of happiness in terms of the employees’ facial expressions. It is assumed that depicted faces transmit emotional signals, that receivers are hardwired to react to such signals, and that the emotional signals influence the outcomes of the receivers’ information processing activities. Our empirical results show that this was indeed the case: employee display of happiness was positively and significantly associated with employee evaluations. The contribution of employee happiness remained significant when other characteristics of the depicted face (e.g., attractiveness) were controlled for. Our results also show that employee evaluations had a positive impact on the overall evaluation of the offer of the employee’s firm, and that the employee evaluations mediated the association between employee display of happiness and the evaluation of the offer.

1. Introduction

Service firms often use pictures of their employees in marketing communications activities (Tripp, 1997). Indeed, in a service context, several scholars recommend portrayals of employees, because this is likely to make a service offer more tangible and thereby easier to evaluate for customers who are in the pre-purchase phase of the decision making process (Hill and Gandhi, 1992; Mittal, 1999). Such portrayals of employees should be seen in the light of a broader trend in which marketing communications activities are becoming increasingly imaged-based, and images depicting humans are particularly prevalent (McQuarrie, 2007; Pollay, 1985). Prior advertising research has shown that several characteristics of depicted persons (e.g., physical attractiveness and ethnic origin) affect receivers’ reactions to the ad and the advertised product (Baker and Churchill, 1977; Petroshius and Crocker, 1989), so the characteristics of depicted persons do have marketing implications.

In the present study we examine one particular aspect of depicted employees, namely the impact of their faces’ emotional content. Our main assumptions are that (a) human faces transmit emotional signals, (b) receivers are hardwired to assess the emotional signals stemming from others’ faces, and (c) such signals influence outcomes of the receivers’ information processing activities. We focus on one particular emotional state of the depicted person, happiness, because happy facial expressions are ubiquitous in a marketing communications context. The purpose of our study is to examine if happiness expressed by depicted service employee faces influences receiver reactions, namely evaluations of the employee and evaluations of the offer from the firm in which the employee works.

This examination is intended to offer contributions to several fields. Previous service research has examined the impact of employees’ display of emotions on customer reactions in the context of service encounters (e.g., Andrzejewski and Mooney, 2016; Barger and Grandey, 2006; Gabriel et al., 2015; Otterbring, 2017; Pugh, 2001; Söderlund and Rosengren, 2004; Söderlund and Rosengren, 2010; Ustrov et al., 2016), and the present study’s focus on employees’ display of emotions in marketing materials is intended to broaden the scope of the existing research so that it includes the potential for an impact of the employee’s facial expressions also before the customer shows up for a service encounter. Moreover, the impact of the depicted employee has been acknowledged in some previous studies. So far, however, existing attempts to assess specific characteristics of employees used in pictorial material in a service context and their impact on receivers have dealt with only a few employee characteristics, for example, employee gender (Lin et al., 2008; Stafford, 1998) and whether the employee is a manager or not (Stafford, 1998).

As for specific contributions in emotional terms, it should be noted that emotions are often dealt with in amalgamated terms in the marketing literature (i.e., many discrete emotions are lumped together in broad categories such as “positive emotions” or “positive affect”). Yet
several authors have argued that discrete emotions with the same va-
lence may differ in their antecedents, autonomic physiology, central
nervous system physiology, evolutionary history, and in their effects on
judgment and choice (Ekman, 1993; Lerner et al., 2015; Söderlund and
Rosengren, 2004), so our focus on one specific and discrete emotion,
happiness, is an attempt to respond to the call for a disaggregated ap-
proach in academic research on emotions.

Moreover, existing attempts to assess the impact of a happy human
face on receivers’ reactions have mainly been based on smiles, which
are typically operationalized in dichotomous terms (Berg et al., 2015;
Kulczynski et al., 2016; Magnini et al., 2013; Nelson et al., 1988,1988;
Otterbring, 2017) or in terms of smile levels (Gabriel et al., 2015;
Ustov et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2015). Similarly, the typical study of
the impact of facial expressions outside a marketing context con-
ceptualizes facial expressions in categorical terms. For example, one
particular face is either happy, angry, or sad (e.g., Critchley et al.,
2000). However, if a depicted person smiles rather than does not smile,
shows a small or a big smile, or if a person’s facial expression is happy as
opposed to angry or sad, we argue, represent relatively primitive in-
dicators of happiness levels, so in the present study we make an attempt
to assess depicted employees’ happiness with continuous measures –
both with data from rating scales used by participants and psycho-
physiological data. The second type of data (we used the software Fa-
cereader to assess the emotional content in depicted employees’ faces)
represents an approach hitherto not used in existing studies. Indeed, the
presence of both rating scales data and psychophysiological data in our
study allows us to compare these two types of data, and we discuss
several outcomes of such comparisons.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Faces and expressions of happiness

Our point of departure is that faces are inherently interesting and
attention-grabbing (Palermo and Rhodes, 2007), and that we humans
are evolutionarily hardwired to assess them in several dimensions
(Garrido et al., 2016). One particularly important dimension is emo-
tional states, because our ability to correctly attribute the emotions of
others is a crucial component of successful social interaction (Harker
and Keltner, 2001). It is therefore not surprising that discrete brain
areas are associated with the processing of specific facial expressions
(Critchley et al., 2000), and that the processes used for attributing
different emotional states to different facial expressions are extremely
fast and efficient (Batty and Taylor, 2003; Ekman, 1992). Indeed, even
subliminal exposure to another person’s facial expression has been
shown to have an impact on the receiver’s behavior (Winkielman et al.,
2005).

We humans seem to be particularly well-equipped to assess the level
of happiness in a face, in the sense that this expression is recognized
very rapidly (Batty and Taylor, 2003; Simpson and Crandall, 1972), it
produces a high level of agreement among observers who are asked to
provide judgments about target persons (Borkenau and Liebler, 1992),
and it is connected to target person happiness with a higher rate than
the rate with which other facial expressions are connected to other emo-
tional states (Ebner et al., 2010; Langner et al., 2010; Wallbott,
1991). Given exposure to a person with a visible face, it is therefore
expected that the receiver makes a happiness assessment with regards
to the person – and we expect that this assessment has implications for
evaluations of the person. Moreover, in a situation in which the person
is a representative of a firm, we expect that the evaluation of the person
would influence evaluations of the firm’s offer.

2.2. A depicted employee’s level of happiness and evaluations of the
employee

Given exposure to a person with a visible face, and a happiness
assessment of this person, the person’s happiness can influence the re-
ceiver’s evaluation of the person in several ways. First, the positive
charge of a person’s happiness can have an impact on assessments of
other attributes of the person. This is sometimes referred to as a halo
effect; the perceptions of one attribute is influenced by information
about another attribute (Forgas, 2011). Previous studies indicate that
persons with happy facial expressions (such as smiles) are believed to
have more positive characteristics (e.g., being friendly, assuring, good-
natured, intelligent, sincere, sociable, and agreeable) than persons with
non-happy facial expressions (Hack, 2014; Knutson, 1996; Magnini
et al., 2013; Nelson et al., 1988; Otta et al., 1994, 1996; Reis et al., 1990; Turner and Hunt, 2014). Then, in the next step, we assume that the combined bundle of positive attributes are in-
tegrated in the receiver’s mind (Anderson, 1971) and have a positive
impact on overall evaluations of the person.

Second, receivers perceive happy persons as opposed to non-happy
persons as more similar to themselves (Garrido et al., 2016). One reason
may be that of all emotions people experience in everyday life, happy-
ness is the most frequent (Wilhelm et al., 2004). Similarly, in diary-
based studies, people typically report higher levels of positive affect
than negative affect (Vittengl and Holt, 1998). In fact, most people
report being happy most of the time (Taylor and Brown, 1988), and this
aspect can boost similarity perceptions when we are exposed to another
happy person. And in person perception studies, there is strong em-
pirical support for a similarity-liking link (Cialdini, 2001). Given that a
happy face is a powerful signal of social acceptance (Critchley et al.,
2000), liking for persons with such facial expressions can also be
boosted by associations to inclusion and belongingness, which re-
present positively charged states for most individuals.

Third, the receiver’s own emotions can be influenced by perceptions of
the target person’s emotions, because emotions are contagious in
social settings (Hattiefield et al., 1993; Howard and Gengler, 2001;
Neumann and Strack, 2000; Pugh, 2001). Indeed, mere exposure to a
photo of a stranger is enough to induce emotions in the receiver –
emotions that are congruent with the emotions displayed by the
stranger. This type of emotional contagion seems particularly likely
with respect to happiness (Dimberg and Thunberg, 1998; Harker and
Keltner, 2001; Lau, 1982). It is thus expected that there is a positive
association between the happiness expressed by a target person’s face
and the receiver’s own happiness. Results supporting this are reported
by Kulczynski et al. (2016); they found that an ad comprising a picture
of celebrity induced higher receiver positive affect when the celebrity
was smiling as opposed to not smiling. In the next step in the receiver’s
information processing activities, it is expected that the receiver’s own
happiness has a positive impact on his or her overall evaluations of a
target person. This is consonant with an affect infusion mechanism
(Forgas, 1995), and this influence of own emotions on evaluations is
particularly likely when there is little time or little detailed information
available for substantive processing (i.e., conditions under which much
marketing content is processed).

Several possible routes of influence are thus suggesting that persons
perceived to be happy are evaluated more positively. This is consonant
with indirect evidence regarding behavioral outcomes. For example,
perceivers approach persons displaying positive emotions more often
than those displaying negative emotions (Rennels and Kayl, 2015). Si-
imilarly, a smiling facial expression of a depicted person has been shown
to encourage appointments with the person more than when the person
is not smiling (Nelson et al., 1988). The following, then, is hypothesized
when a receiver is exposed to a photo of a service firm employee:

H1. The depicted employee’s happiness is positively associated with the
receiver’s overall evaluation of the employee

2.3. Person evaluations and evaluations of the firm’s offer

Many service-related studies dealing with face-to-face encounters
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