BORANG PENGESAHAN STATUS THESIS

JUDUL: THE EFFECTS OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION OF HOTEL EMPLOYEES UPON EMOTIONAL RESPONSES OF HOTEL GUESTS

IIJAZAH: SARJANA PENGURUSAN PERNIAGAAN

SESi PENGAJIAN: 2011-2012

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Penulis: SHIRLEY KUEH
Alamat: 206, Taman Li Hua,
Jalan Tun Hussein Onn,
97000 Bintulu,
Sarawak.

Penyelia Utama: Dr. Awangku Hassanal Bahar Pengiran Bagul

Tarikh: 30 Ogos 2012
THE EFFECTS OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION OF HOTEL EMPLOYEES UPON EMOTIONAL RESPONSES OF HOTEL GUESTS

SHIRLEY KUEH

DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE MASTER OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

SCHOOL OF BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS, UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH
2012
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the material in this thesis is my own except for quotations, excerpts, equations, summaries and references, which have been duly acknowledged.

30 August 2012

Shirley Kueh
PE20117022C
CERTIFICATION

NAME : SHIRLEY KUEH

MATRIC NO. : PE20117022C

TITLE : THE EFFECTS OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION OF HOTEL EMPLOYEES UPON EMOTIONAL RESPONSES OF HOTEL GUESTS

DEGREE : MASTER OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

VIVA DATE : 9 AUGUST 2012

DECLARED BY

1. MAIN SUPERVISOR
   DR. AWANGKU HASSANAL BAHAR PENGIRAN BAGUL

2. CO-SUPERVISOR
   MR. LIM THIEN SANG
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I wish to express my immense respect and appreciation to my main supervisor, Dr. Awangku Hassanal Bahar Pengiran Bagul. Throughout the course of this work, his outstanding advise, support and guidance led to many fruitful discussions. For this reason, and countless others I would like to thank him. Additionally, I would like to express my gratitude to my co-supervisor, Mr. Lim Thien Sang, who provided me valuable advice for the statistical analysis of this study.

Furthermore, I would like to thank all lecturers of the School of Business and Economics for their teachings and guidance throughout my MBA course. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank all my respondents for taking part in this study.

Special thanks to all my fellow friends for their motivation and help. Their encouragement gave me strength to carry on with my thesis. Besides, I would like to thank my parents and my sister for their love and tremendous support.

All these people and others whom I did not mention here have contributed to achieving my MBA degree and making my time at Universiti Malaysia Sabah an unforgettable learning experience.

Shirley Kueh
30 August 2012
ABSTRACT

THE EFFECTS OF HOTEL EMPLOYEES NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION UPON THE EMOTIONAL RESPONSES OF HOTEL GUESTS

This study was carried out to understand the effects of hotel employees' nonverbal communication on the emotional responses of hotel guests in one and two star hotels of Kota Kinabalu. Through the administration of survey questionnaires, a total of 128 hotel guests participated in this study. Three dimensions of nonverbal communication were identified: body and vocal behaviour, physical appearance, and touching behaviour. With regards to emotional responses, two dimensions, namely positive and negative emotion were identified. The results showed that body and vocal behaviour, and physical appearance of hotel employees have a significant positive effect on the positive emotion of hotel guest. Meanwhile, only body and vocal behaviour of hotel employees negatively affect negative emotion of hotel guest. Interestingly, it was found that touching behaviour of hotel employees has a significant positive effect on negative emotion. Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research are also discussed.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 OVERVIEW

In the broadest sense, communication is the transfer of signal or message from one party to another party, in which the encoded message is subsequently decoded by the receiver (Weiner and Mehrabian, 1968; Sperber and Wilson, 1995). Face-to-face two-way conversation involves immediate feedback and on the spot clarification, as well as the opportunity to observe nonverbal communication signs (Credland, 1984). Apart from communicating meaning, information, and thoughts, Sperber and Wilson (1995) highlighted that attitudes and emotions can also be communicated through interpersonal interactions.

Several authors have illustrated the importance of nonverbal communication in the total communication process. For example, Townsend (1985) noted that body languages express up to 75 percent of the intended meaning in communication. Similarly, Birdwhitshe suggested that 65 percent of the communication process is made up of nonverbal communication whereas Mehrabian and Williams pointed out that 93 percent of communication is possible by nonverbal means (as cited in Jung and Yoon, 2011, p. 543). Fromkin and Rodman also agreed that up to 90 percent of communication is nonverbal (as cited in Gabott and Hogg, 2000, p. 386). Clearly, nonverbal communication constitutes a large portion of the total communication process. In fact, nonverbal messages are capable of complementing, enhancing, or contradicting verbal messages (Knapp and Hall, 2006; Rammal, 2007; Richmond and McCroskey, 2004).

Since the term nonverbal excludes communication through language, characteristics that it encompasses can be very wide. For example, it can refer to physical appearance, gesture and movement, face and eye behaviour, vocal
behaviour, space, touch, environment and time (Poon, 1998; Richmond and McCroskey, 2004). These nonverbal behaviours generally fall into four categories, namely kinesics, proxemics, paralanguage and physical appearance (Sundaram and Webster, 2000).

In the business context, the influence of service employees’ nonverbal communication on customers’ service encounters has been tested in different settings, including retail stores (Jacob, Guéguen, Martin, and Boulbry., 2011; Kim, Ju, and Johnson, 2009), restaurants (Barger and Grandey, 2006; Du, Fan, and Feng, 2011; Jung and Yoon, 2011), banks (Pugh, 2001), hotels (Gabott and Hogg, 2000; Grandey, Fisk, Mattila, Jansen, and Sideman, 2005; Yuksel, Hancer, and Cengiz, 2007), airlines (Gountas, Ewing, and Gountas, 2007; Söderlund and Rosengren, 2010), travel agents (Söderlund and Rosengren, 2008), and even bookstores (Söderlund and Julander, 2009). Nonverbal communication is crucial to service-based businesses because service employees are directly involved building relationships with its customers. As explained by the concept of emotional labour, service employees are often expected to put up positive display attitude through facial expressions, body language, or even tone of voice (Chu, Baker, and Murrmann, 2012; Diefendorff and Gosserand, 2003; Lam and Chen, 2012), together with a presentable appearance (Nickson, Warhurst, and Dutton, 2005; Rafaeli, 1993) as part of their job requirement.

Specifically, research has shown that service employees’ nonverbal communication from various aspects such as facial expression and emotional display (Du et al., 2011; Pugh, 2011), smiles (Barger and Grandey, 2006; Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul, and Gremler, 2006; Söderlund and Rosengren, 2008; Soderlund and Rosengren, 2010), and physical appearance (Söderlund and Julander, 2010; Kim et al., 2009; Koernig and Page, 2002) has an impact on the outcome of the service encounter. Other studies provided evidence of nonverbal communication from a wider scope including posture, eye contact, smiling, nodding, vocal tone and intonation (Gabott and Hogg, 2000; Jung and Yoon, 2011). The emotional contagion theory which suggests the transmission of emotion through nonverbal cues during interpersonal interaction has often been put forward
to explain how customers capture the emotion or affect of service employees (Pugh, 2001; Verbeke, 1997). In other words, service employees’ expression of favourable nonverbal behaviours may induce customers to experience positive emotion at service touch-points.

Malaysia and the Sabah state in particular, have some of the most captivating tourist attraction of the world. In fact, tourism is a vital economic driver for Sabah as it is the third highest contributor to Sabah's economy after agriculture and manufacturing (Sabah Economic Development and Investment Authority, 2011). Moreover, tourism is one of the National Key Economic Area (NKEA) identified in the Tenth Malaysia Plan, in which a NKEA is defined as a driver of economic activity with the potential to contribute a quantifiable amount of economic growth to the Malaysian economy (Tenth Malaysia Plan, 2010). According to the Tourism Satellite Account 2000 – 2010 released by the Department of Statistics, Malaysia (2012), the internal tourism consumption which is the combination of both foreign and domestic tourism expenditure increased from RM76,134.3 million in 2009 to RM85,923.3 million in 2010. Of this RM85,923.3 million, internal visitors consumed most on shopping, which was 30.2 percent, followed by accommodation, which was 24.1 percent. These statistics suggest that the hospitality industry, particularly the hotel industry that caters to the accommodation need of both foreign and domestic tourists is a rather lucrative industry with huge potential for growth.

In this research, it is interesting to study the effects of hotel employees' nonverbal communication on the emotional responses of hotel guest in the local context. This is because the positive or negative emotional response of hotel guest is often the precursor to other service outcomes such as service quality perception, customer satisfaction, re-purchase behaviour, and so on. Therefore, a refined understanding of this issue is crucial as it allows the hotel industry to further improve customer service based on the perception and expectation of hotel guests.
1.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT
The increasing growth of the hotel industry, particularly in emerging tourist destinations led to intensified competition across the hotel industry (Rodríguez-Díaz and Espino-Rodríguez, 2006). As a result, one of the main challenges faced by the hotel industry is the issue of improving their competitive advantage, in which, part of the concern revolve around the roles of frontline employees in creating high quality service encounters (Nickson et al., 2005). Sundaram and Webster (2000) suggested that various nonverbal cues of service employees such as smiling, laughter, head nodding, frequent eye contact, hand shaking, proper speech rate, tone and loudness, use of touch, as well as physical attractiveness could affect customers’ perception of friendliness, courtesy, empathy, trust, credibility, and competency in a way or another.

Although the quality of employee-customer interaction has been recognized as a key competitive tool for service-based businesses, many companies failed to consider behavioural differentiation as an opportunity to improve service delivery (Bacon, 2004). The lack of proper nonverbal communication during service interaction with customers reduces the likelihood of customers to develop appreciation or emotional connection with the service provider. In fact, customer complaining behaviour can emerge if a customer’s experience lies outside the “acceptance zone” (Tronvoll, 2007), often initiated by the experience of negative emotion during the service interaction (Tronvoll, 2011). From here, it can be seen that inappropriate use of nonverbal communication is one of the contributing factors towards customer dissatisfaction or customer complaint. As suggested by Anderson and Narus (1990), the proper use of nonverbal communication methods by employees are crucial in reducing conflicts during the service delivery process and dramatically impacts customer satisfaction.

Even though the link between service employees’ nonverbal communication and the customers’ emotional response, as well as other outcome of the service encounter has been widely investigated in many settings, most of these studies were conducted based on experimental approach instead of real-life experiences. Specifically, studies involving hotel settings relied on videotaped scenario (Gabott
and Hogg, 2000; Grandey et al., 2005) and written scenarios (Yuksel et al., 2007) to stimulate response from the participants. In other words, nonverbal characteristics of hotel employees were manipulated to certain condition of interest so that causal relationships can be tested. Although this approach allows the control of extraneous variables or any variation in the service encounter, relevant behaviours in everyday setting may not be observed. Therefore, there is a need to further refine understanding of the effects of hotel employees’ nonverbal communication upon emotional responses of hotel guest based on real-life service encounters.

In the Malaysian context, there is relatively limited study on nonverbal communication. Although a research related to nonverbal communication skills among training teachers of Universiti Malaysia Sains was found (Ahmad, Amzah, and Aman, 2009), research related to nonverbal communication of employees at service touch-points was hardly found. Due to the scarcity of nonverbal communication research in service encounters, particularly in the context of hotel industry in Kota Kinabalu, there is a need for more understanding of this issue. Thus, with the aforementioned issues in mind, this thesis addresses the problem of how nonverbal communication of hotel employees influence perception and emotional responses of hotel guest.

1.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES
Consistent with the research questions, the research objectives of this study are:
• To identify the types of nonverbal communication in the hotel industry
• To identify hotel employees’ nonverbal communication that cause positive emotion of hotel guests
• To identify hotel employees’ nonverbal communication that cause negative emotion of hotel guests

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS
The research questions of this study are as follows:
• What are the types of nonverbal communication in the hotel industry?
• Does nonverbal communication of hotel employees affect positive emotion of hotel guests?
• Does nonverbal communication of hotel employees affect negative emotion of hotel guests?

1.4 SCOPE OF STUDY
This study focused on the effects of hotel employees’ nonverbal communication towards emotional response of hotel guests. Specifically, the four components of nonverbal communication that were studied include kinesics, proxemis, paralanguage, and physical appearance. The targeted respondents were hotel guests staying in one and two star hotels in Kota Kinabalu (Table 1.1), regardless of whether they visit Kota Kinabalu for leisure or business purposes. Kota Kinabalu was chosen as the research site because of its ever growing tourism industry which continuously attracts both Malaysians and foreigners to visit the city.

Table 1.1: One and two star hotels targeted for the research.

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<th>Category of Star Rating</th>
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<td>One star</td>
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<td>Hotel Deleeton</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Tune Hotel 1 Borneo</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Wah May Hotel</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Winner Hotel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two star</td>
<td>Casuarina Hotel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Century Hotel</td>
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<td></td>
<td>D’ Borneo Hotel</td>
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<td></td>
<td>De Galleria Hotel</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Implana Mutiara Hotel</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Kinabalu Daya Hotel</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Manja Hotel</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Promenade Hotel Apartments</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rainforest Lodge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tang Dynasty Bay Hotel</td>
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Source: Sabah Tourism Board (2012a).

Instead of choosing higher star rated hotels as the scope of study, one and two star hotels were chosen because service variation in these hotels is anticipated to be higher. As compared to higher star hotels, lower star rated hotels generally
lack explicit policies about display rules of its front line employees (Lam and Chen, 2011). Therefore, it would be more meaningful to study the effects of hotel employees’ nonverbal communication on the service encounter under such condition. Through questionnaires, hotel guests were asked on whether the four dimensions of nonverbal communication affect their emotional response positively or negatively. In other words, this research focused on the hotel guests’ perception of hotel employees’ nonverbal communication.

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY
This study offers a better understanding of how service employees’ nonverbal communication affects emotional response of customers. Basically, this study tested the model by Jung and Yoon (2011) in a different research setting. The researchers conducted their study in family restaurants in Seoul, Korea, whereas this study adapted the model to be tested in a hotel reception setting in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Model testing in a different setting allows improved understanding of how the model can work in many other service-based businesses. In other words, it broadens the applicability of the model in different environments.

According to the Sabah Tourism Board (2012b), the Sabah state alone attracted a total of 795,953 international visitor arrivals and 1,708,716 Malaysian arrivals in 2011, which recorded a total growth of 13.6% as compared to the previous year. This encouraging growth of Sabah’s tourism industry combined with a good understanding of the relationship between service employees’ nonverbal communication and emotional response of customers during service encounter enables hoteliers to put good use of their service employees as an asset to stand out from competitors. From the perspective of the hotel industry, this study offers insight to how frontline employees play a role in eliciting positive or negative emotion of customers in the local hotels context.

In fact, the findings of the study could assist hoteliers in controlling behavioural displays of their frontline employees. Nonverbal cues perceived as favourable by the hotel guests should be promoted to build a good impression while nonverbal behaviours that could induce negative emotions of hotel guests
should be avoided. Trainings can be conducted to teach and improve nonverbal communication skills and other "soft" skills such as interpersonal skills and self-presentation skills. In the long run, improved customer service based on customers' expectation will have an additive effect on customers' evaluation of both tangible and intangible offerings by the hotel.

1.6 DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED
In order to allow a clear understanding of this research, key terms used in this research are clarified in the following section. However, the list is not exhaustive but instead acts as a general definition guideline for the study.

1.6.1 Nonverbal Communication
Nonverbal communication refers to communication through channels other than language (Guerrero and Floyd, 2006; Knapp and Hall, 2006).

1.6.2 Kinesics
Kinesics refers to body movements such as body orientation, eye contact, nodding, hand shaking, and smiling (Sundaram and Webster, 2000).

1.6.3 Proxemics
Proxemics is the distance and relative posture between the speaker and the listener during a communication process (Sundaram and Webster, 2000).

1.6.4 Paralanguage
Paralanguage refers to vocal qualities that are used as cues, whether consciously or unconsciously by the listener to perceive the condition or real meaning of the speaker. Examples include vocal pitch, amplitude, pitch variation, pauses, and fluency (Sundaram and Webster, 2000).

1.6.5 Physical Appearance
As the term suggests, physical appearance is a nonverbal element that covers physical attractiveness and appropriate clothing (Sundaram and Webster, 2000).
1.6.6 Emotional Response
Emotion is usually explained with reference to a list of feelings such as anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, and surprise (Cabanac, 2002). According to Jung and Yoon (2011), emotions are “personal feelings arising from certain behaviours or responses” (p. 545).

1.7 ORGANIZATION OF THESIS
The thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an overview of nonverbal communication in service-based businesses including the hospitality industry. Additionally, problem statement, research problems, research objectives, scope of study, significance of the study, as well as the definition of key terms used are presented. Chapter 2 is a literature review of nonverbal communication theories, emotional contagion theories, and recent research on nonverbal communication in service encounters. Meanwhile, Chapter 3 explains research methodology that was used in this study. Research framework, definitions of variables, the hypotheses of the study, research design, sampling design, instrument and measurement, data collection method, and data analysis method are all addressed in this chapter. Chapter 4 provides a detailed chronology of results obtained from the study. Last but not least, Chapter 5 presents a discussion of these results in terms of the literature reviewed. Besides, limitations of the study and suggestions for further research are proposed as well. Finally, this chapter concludes the study with a summary of the main findings.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0  INTRODUCTION
This chapter illustrates the findings of different authors in relation to the subject. First, a general background on nonverbal communication theories and emotional contagion theory are presented. This is followed by an in depth review of recent research on the relationship between nonverbal communication and emotional response; between nonverbal communication and customer perception of service quality; and between nonverbal communication and customer satisfaction. Lastly, the chapter ends with a summary of reviewed articles, together with a conclusion drawn from the literature reviewed.

2.1  NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION
Nonverbal communication has been defined in many ways by different authors. To begin with, Hickson III and Stacks (1993) defined nonverbal communication as “a process whereby people, through the intentional or unintentional behaviour of normative actions and expectations, other than words themselves, express experiences, feelings, and attitudes in order to relate to and control themselves, others, and their environments” (p. 8). The authors further explained that nonverbal interaction may include characteristic of the speaker and receiver such as physical appearance, posture, distance maintained, voice and facial expressions, as well as the situation perceived by the receiver.

In line with this explanation, Guerrero and Floyd (2006) pointed out that the most common definition for nonverbal communication is that it encompasses all behaviours that are not words. Although Knapp and Hall (2006) also agreed that nonverbal communication refers to communication by using methods other than words, the authors highlighted that nonverbal communication is a rather complex
phenomena, which at times cannot be completely separated from verbal communication, but is instead intertwined with each other. This view is supported by Richmond and McCroskey (2004) as the authors noted that it is rather impossible to make a complete distinction between verbal and nonverbal messages. Moreover, it was suggested that nonverbal behaviour is better to be treated as a package of simultaneous messages rather than discrete message of gesture, voice, touch, and so on.

Clearly, although different authors define nonverbal communication from slightly different perspectives, it is generally agreeable that nonverbal communication is communication through channels other than language. Furthermore, this definition is sufficient for the purpose of this study. In order to better understand nonverbal communication, the following sections will look into the classification and the functions of nonverbal communication.

2.1.1 Classification of Nonverbal Communication
Due to the vast variety of nonverbal behaviour, several authors attempted to organize nonverbal communication into different categories to allow for a more comprehensive understanding of nonverbal communication. Hickson III and Stacks (1993) classified nonverbal communications into spatial use, physical appearance, overt body and vocal communication, and covert-body temporal communication. According to them, spatial use covers touch, personal space, territory and the environment whereas physical appearance includes body shape, body image, physical attractiveness, clothing and accessories. Meanwhile, overt body communication encompasses the use of gesture, facial expression, and voice. Lastly, covert body-temporal communication relates to phenomena are rather intangible, such as the effect of olfactory system or in other words bodily odour, bio-feedbacks like deception and detection, as well as the impact of time on the communication process.

On the other hand, Knapp and Hall (2006) categorized nonverbal communication into three main units: the communication environment, physical characteristics of the communicators, body movement and position. The authors
REFERENCES


