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Reports

The pantomime of persuasion: Fit between nonverbal communication and influence strategies

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ABSTRACT

How can we be more successful in persuading others and increase the odds of behavioral compliance? We argue that when a verbal influence strategy is embedded in a nonverbal style that fits its orientation, this boosts the strategy's effectiveness, whereas a misfit attenuates its impact. In field-experiment 1, agents tried to persuade participants in buying a candybox by using an approach-oriented strategy (Door-In-The-Face, DITF). An eager nonverbal style increased the impact of the DITF, whereas vigilant nonverbal cues rendered it ineffective. Conversely, field-experiment 2 showed that an avoidance-oriented strategy (Disrupt-Then-Reframe) benefited from being presented in a vigilant, rather than an eager nonverbal style, which similarly attenuated its impact. Hence, eager nonverbal cues promote the effectiveness of approach-oriented influence strategies whereas vigilant cues do the opposite and increase the impact of avoidance-oriented influence strategies.

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We are all frequently approached and sometimes harassed by volunteers, fundraisers, and sales-representatives attempting to get us to say “yes” to their offer. These agents have at their disposal a wide variety of influence strategies aimed at increasing the odds of compliance. Studies have focused on what agents have to say to foster persuasion, but have largely ignored the interplay with nonverbal communication in this process (e.g., Burger, 1999; McFarland, Challagalla, & Shervani, 2006). Furthermore, the influence of fit (and misfit) between nonverbal communication and influence strategies on the recipient's compliance has not yet received empirical investigation. The present research aims to fill this void by examining the impact of influence strategies when embedded in nonverbal behavior that either fits or misfits the key orientation of the strategy. We propose that nonverbal communication can “boost” the persuasive impact of influence strategies to the extent that it fits the strategy's orientation, and conversely, that a misfit between nonverbal behavior and type of strategy may render it ineffective in fostering compliance.

Previous research on social influence has focused primarily on identifying and testing verbalized scripts that agents may use to induce compliance and persuasion on the part of the recipient (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). For instance, research on personal selling has identified a host of persuasive techniques that sales representatives use to convince prospective buyers, such as information exchange, the use of recommendations, requests, promises, or ingratiation (McFarland et al., 2006). In addition, studies have focused

on several well-defined influence techniques employing heuristic decision making to induce compliance. Well-known examples include the “Door-In-The-Face” technique (DITF; Cialdini et al., 1975), in which the target request is presented as a concession to an unreasonably large initial request, and the “Disrupt-Then-Reframe” technique (DTR; Davis & Knowles, 1999; Fennis, Das, & Pruyn, 2004, 2006; Kardes, Fennis, Hirt, Tormala, & Bullington, 2007), where an otherwise conventional sales script is interrupted by a subtle, odd element (i.e., the “disruption”, for example stating the price of an offer in pennies before stating it in dollars) followed by a persuasive phrase that concludes the script (i.e., the “reframe”, e.g., “it's a bargain!”).

Interestingly, Knowles and Linn (2004) have recently argued that the DITF and DTR might operate differently because they rely on different orientations. More specifically, these authors have proposed that some influence strategies may work because they increase an approach orientation, while others are effective because they mobilize an avoidance orientation. More specifically, what they term “alpha strategies” persuade people by activating approach forces, increasing people's motivation toward a goal by making the offer or request more attractive. Hence, these strategies persuade by adding an extra incentive for compliance. For example, offering a discount to a product qualifies as an alpha strategy because it provides an extra reason to buy the product. Likewise, one can engage the norm of reciprocity (i.e., granting a small favor or concession that prompts recipients to reciprocate and return the favor) as an addition to the approach forces promoting compliance (Knowles & Linn, 2004). As demonstrated by Cialdini et al. (1975), the DITF hinges on the principle of reciprocity (see also Fennis, Janssen, & Vohs, 2009; Gouldner, 1960): a large request by the agent is typically declined

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after which the agent presents the smaller request as a clear concession, thus provoking a counter-concession on the part of the recipient (i.e., compliance). Hence, the DITF works because of the addition of an interpersonal obligation to the reasons for compliance (Knowles, Butler, & Linn, 2001).

“Omega strategies”, on the other hand, attempt to persuade people by minimizing avoidance forces, reducing people’s motivation to move away from a goal. One way of minimizing avoidance forces is to reduce or distract resistance to persuasion. For example, in a classic study, Festinger and Maccoby (1964) presented participants with a comedy to distract them from a counterattitudinal persuasive message. Similarly, one can directly disrupt the extent of recipient counterargumentation to resist a persuasion attempt (Knowles & Linn, 2004). As shown by Fennis et al. (2004), this process underlies the impact of the DTR technique. More specifically, this research showed that the disruption interfered with the target’s counterargumentation in response to the persuasion attempt, thus increasing the persuasive impact of the reframe.

There is reason to assume that nonverbal communication may play a role of significance in these settings – by itself and in interplay with these verbal influence strategies. For instance, a study of McGinley, LeFevre, and McGinley (1975) showed that agents with open body positions were evaluated more positively and were more persuasive than agents with closed body positions. In addition, Cesario and Higgins (2008) investigated the influence of fit between the recipient’s orientation and the influence agent’s nonverbal style. They distinguished between an eager and a vigilant nonverbal style. An eager nonverbal style is approach-oriented and involves animated, broad opening movements, hand movements openly projected outward, forward-leaning body positions, fast body movements, and fast speech rate. A vigilant nonverbal style is avoidance-oriented and involves gestures showing precision, motions that represent slowing down, backward-leaning positions, slower body movements, and slower speech (Cesario & Higgins, 2008). They showed that when recipients in a promotion focus – who perceive goals as hopes and aspirations and prefer eager, advancement strategies (Higgins, 1998) – viewed a message delivered in an eager nonverbal style, they developed more positive attitudes and also behaved more in accordance with the recommendation than when there was a misfit between nonverbal style and regulatory orientation. Likewise, when recipients in a prevention focus – who perceive goals as duties and obligations and prefer vigilant, cautious strategies (Higgins, 1998) – viewed a message delivered in a vigilant nonverbal style, they too showed more persuasion and advocacy congruent behavior. The experience of regulatory fit underlies these effects, such that a fit between the recipient’s focus and the orientation indicated by the nonverbal style can augment persuasion and compliance, whereas a misfit can do the opposite and decrease persuasion and compliance (Cesario & Higgins, 2008).

Importantly, the experience of fit can arise from the interplay between message characteristics and recipient’s orientation or it may reside in different features of the persuasive appeal itself (see for example Evans & Petty, 2003; Koenig, Cesario, Molden, Kosloff, & Higgins, 2009). Hence, we extend previous research by examining the impact of fit and misfit within one and the same persuasive appeal and assess the effectiveness of (mis)fit of the type of verbal influence strategy and nonverbal style on recipient’s behavioral compliance with a sales request. More specifically, we argue that the impact of alpha (approach) and omega (avoidance) influence strategies will be moderated by the type of nonverbal style. We propose that the effectiveness of these influence strategies will be boosted in situations of fit and attenuated in situations of misfit with the type of nonverbal style. Hence, alpha influence strategies will receive a boost when they are delivered in an eager non-verbal style. Similarly, the impact of omega influence strategies will be increased when delivered in a vigilant nonverbal style. In contrast, the impact of alpha (omega)

strategies will be reduced when delivered in a vigilant (eager) nonverbal style.

The effect of fit between influence strategy and the agent’s nonverbal behavior style is investigated in two field studies where we solicited compliance with a purchase request. In Study 1, we examined whether the impact of an approach-oriented influence strategy, a Door-In-The-Face technique, would benefit when an influence agent exhibits an eager as opposed to vigilant nonverbal style. We expected the impact of the DITF technique on compliance to be more pronounced when delivered in an eager, rather than vigilant nonverbal style. In Study 2, we examined whether the impact of an avoidance-oriented influence strategy, a Disrupt-Then-Reframe technique, would benefit when an influence agent exhibits a vigilant as opposed to eager nonverbal style. We expected the impact of the DTR technique on compliance to be more pronounced when delivered in a vigilant, rather than eager nonverbal style.

Experiment 1

Method

Participants and design

The present field-experiment employed a 2 (nonverbal style: eager vs. vigilant) × 2 (influence strategy: Door-In-The-Face (DITF) vs. target request-only) between participants design. In a commercial-selling context, a total of 99 consumers (20 male and 79 female; mean age 51.6 years, *SD* = 16.6 years) participated in the experiment. In this and the next experiment, participant gender did not show any main or interaction effect (all coefficients < 1) and hence, is not discussed further.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to conditions. In a supermarket in an urbanized area, consumers were approached by one of four confederates (2 male and 2 female), blind to experimental hypotheses, acting as sales representatives. They tried to persuade shoppers to buy a box of (Christmas) candy. Each of the confederates exhibited either eager or vigilant nonverbal behavior during his/her interaction with the consumer (cf. Cesario & Higgins, 2008). In the eager style, the confederate used active, open gesticulation with hands projecting outward. In addition he/she actively leaned forward to the participant, and displayed fast body movement and fast speech rate. The vigilant nonverbal style, in contrast, involved a behavior pattern where the confederate used more passive gesticulation, keeping his/her hands close to the body. In addition, he/she leaned slightly backward and displayed slower body movement and speech rate.

In addition, participants were either exposed to a Door-In-The-Face (DITF) influence strategy or a target-request only control script. The DITF technique involved preceding the target request with an unreasonably large initial request (Cialdini et al., 1975). Hence, in the DITF condition, the confederate stated: “Good afternoon sir/madam, Christmas is rapidly approaching, and so these boxes of Christmas candy are on special offer today! I may offer you six boxes of candy for six Euros” The confederate then waited until the target responded (almost always by rejecting the offer) and continued: “You feel that six boxes is a bit too much? Ok, I understand. In that case I may also offer you one box for the price of 99 Eurocents!” In the target-request only condition, the consumer was only presented with the final sales request: “Good afternoon sir/madam, Christmas is rapidly approaching, and so these boxes of Christmas candy are on special offer today! I may offer you one box for the price of 99 Eurocents!” The sales representative waited until the consumer responded to his/her offer. The purchase of any number of boxes of candy served as a measure of compliance with the sales request.

Importantly, to rule out demand explanations, in this and the next experiment, confederates were explicitly instructed to adhere to the designated non-verbal style and influence script, and to do so regardless of the outcome of the persuasion attempt. In addition, the performance of all confederates was unobtrusively observed on random occasions, which confirmed the success of the instruction. Finally, confederates were carefully debriefed after each experiment and probed for awareness of the hypotheses. No confederate voiced any suspicions about the true objectives of the experiments.

Results and discussion

A total of 67% of all consumers approached by the sales representatives purchased one or more boxes of candy. Due to the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable, the data were analyzed in a 2 (nonverbal style: eager vs. vigilant) \times 2 (influence strategy: DITF vs. target request-only) logistic regression. This analysis showed that a larger proportion of consumers agreed to buy a box of candy when exposed to a sales representative displaying an eager nonverbal style (71%), than a vigilant nonverbal style (51%), Wald(1) = 6.57, $p < .01$. In addition, a significant impact of type of influence strategy was found, Wald(1) = 8.07, $p < .01$. 74% of those exposed to the DITF strategy complied with the sales request, whereas 48% of the participants in the target request-only condition did so. Importantly, this main effect was qualified by a significant interaction, Wald(1) = 3.90, $p < .05$. As expected, additional chi-square analyses to probe the interaction showed that the impact of the DITF technique was particularly pronounced when embedded in an eager nonverbal style, $\chi^2(1, N = 99) = 10.08, p = .001$. In contrast, when embedded in a vigilant nonverbal style, the DITF technique was no more effective than the target-request only control condition, $\chi^2 < 1$ (see Table 1 for purchase rates per condition).

These findings provide empirical support for the hypothesis that a fit between nonverbal style and type of influence strategy may boost persuasion. More specifically, approach-oriented nonverbal behavior patterns may boost the effectiveness of an approach-oriented influence strategy, whereas avoidance-oriented nonverbal cues do the opposite and attenuate its persuasive impact. Hence, using a DITF technique to promote the sales of Christmas candy resulted in higher purchase rates than merely stating the offer, but particularly when accompanied by cues associated with eagerness. The DITF effect shrunk to non-significance when vigilant nonverbal cues were used. The following study extends these findings by examining the moderating role of an eager vs. vigilant nonverbal style in the effectiveness of an avoidance, rather than approach, oriented influence strategy.

Table 1
Purchase rates as a function of nonverbal style and influence strategy (Experiment 1 and Experiment 2).

Strategy	Nonverbal Style		
	Eager %	Vigilant %	Neutral %
<i>Experiment 1</i>			
Door-In-The-Face	92 _a	56 _b	–
Target Request-Only	50 _b	46 _b	–
<i>Experiment 2</i>			
Disrupt-Then-Reframe	56 _a	72 _a	68 _a
No Disruption	52 _a	15 _b	48 _a

Row and column entries with different subscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$ as established through Chi-square comparison tests.

Experiment 2

If approach-oriented nonverbal cues foster the impact of approach-oriented influence strategies, then by the same token avoidance-oriented nonverbal cues should do the same for avoidance-oriented influence strategies. The objective of the present experiment was to assess whether a specific avoidance-oriented influence strategy, the Disrupt-Then-Reframe (DTR) technique (Fennis et al., 2004, 2006) would show increased effectiveness when a sales agent exhibits a vigilant as opposed to eager nonverbal style. In addition, as a basis for comparison, the present experiment also included a neutral nonverbal control condition.

Method

Participants and design

Again in a field setting, we used a 3 (nonverbal style: eager vs. vigilant vs. neutral) \times 2 (influence strategy: Disrupt-Then-Reframe (DTR) vs. no disruption) between participants design. A total of 129 consumers (37 male and 92 female; mean age 46.7 years, $SD = 14.8$ years) participated in the experiment and were randomly assigned to conditions.

Procedure

In a different supermarket than the one used in Experiment 1, one of two confederates (one male and one female), blind to experimental hypotheses and acting as sales representatives, persuaded shoppers to buy one or more boxes of candy. As in Experiment 1, each of the confederates exhibited either an eager or vigilant nonverbal style during his/her interaction with the consumer. Moreover in the neutral control condition, the confederate exhibited normal rate speech and body movements, maintained a normal upright position and used limited gesticulation. Participants were either exposed to a Disrupt-Then-Reframe (DTR) influence technique or a no-disruption control script. In the DTR condition, the sales-script included a subtle odd element (i.e., stating the price in eurocents before stating it in Euros) followed by a persuasive, concluding phrase: "Good afternoon sir/madam, these boxes of candy are on special offer today! I may offer you a box for the price of 100 Eurocents...That's one Euro. It's a bargain!" In the no-disruption condition, the script was identical, but the phrase on stating the price in eurocents was omitted: "Good afternoon sir/madam, these boxes of candy are on special offer today! I may offer you a box for the price of one Euro. It's a bargain!" As with the previous study, the purchase of any number of boxes of candy served as a measure of compliance with the sales request.

Results and discussion

A total of 53% of shoppers purchased one or more boxes of candy. We analyzed the data using a 3 (nonverbal style: eager vs. vigilant vs. neutral) \times 2 (influence strategy: DTR vs. no disruption) logistic regression. Results from this analysis showed that only the interaction between nonverbal style and influence strategy reached significance, Wald(2) = 5.91, $p < .05$. As expected, additional differential chi-square analyses to probe the interaction showed that the impact of the DTR technique was most pronounced when the sales representative displayed a vigilant nonverbal style. In this nonverbal condition, the DTR script fostered higher purchase rates than the no disruption script, $\chi^2(1, N = 129) = 14.50, p < .001$ (see Table 1). In contrast, the type of influence strategy did not affect purchase rates in either the eager, $\chi^2 < 1$, or the neutral nonverbal condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 129) = 2.05, p > .15$.

These findings extend the results of Experiment 1 by demonstrating that the persuasive impact of fit between nonverbal behavior and type of influence strategy works both ways. Not only is the effectiveness of an approach-oriented influence strategy augmented when delivered with an eager nonverbal style, an avoidance-oriented

strategy similarly benefits from being embedded in vigilant nonverbal behavior. In addition, similar to [Experiment 1](#), the present findings show that a misfit between nonverbal style and type of strategy attenuates the latter's persuasive impact compared to a condition of fit. Moreover, the relative impact of fit between verbal and nonverbal communication in this study was not only demonstrated compared to a condition of misfit, but also compared to a neutral nonverbal control condition.

General discussion

The present studies extended previous research by assessing the persuasive influence of fit and misfit induced by different features within one and the same persuasive appeal on consumer compliance by zooming in on the interplay between verbal and nonverbal communication. As alpha and omega influence strategies operate differently by either mobilizing approach or avoidance forces, we argued that nonverbal styles that are congruent with a strategy might boost the strategy's effectiveness, whereas incongruent nonverbal styles might attenuate its impact. We tested our assumptions using a typical approach-oriented strategy, the DITF technique, and a more recently developed and tested avoidance-oriented strategy, the DTR technique.

In two field experiments involving "real" supermarket customers as participants, we found support for our notions. More specifically, [Experiment 1](#), set up in a supermarket, showed that the impact of the DITF technique was more pronounced when delivered in an eager nonverbal style – when nonverbal cues fitted the verbal influence script – than in a vigilant nonverbal style – when nonverbal and verbal communication did not fit. The congruent, fitting, persuasive appeal was shown to result in a purchase rate over 1.6 times the purchase rate observed in the non-fitting DITF attempt, which may be considered an impressive illustration of the boosting role of fit between verbal and nonverbal communication on persuasion. Extending this line of reasoning, [Experiment 2](#) showed comparable results in a different supermarket, using different customers, for a typical exemplar of an avoidance strategy; the DTR technique. In this supermarket, actual purchase rates in the condition where there was a fit between the DTR and the nonverbal style in which the script was delivered (i.e., a vigilant style) were almost 1.3 times higher than when the avoidance orientation associated with the DTR did not fit the type of nonverbal style. Hence, this study provided a second demonstration of the same underlying psychological process, using the antipode of an approach-oriented strategy.

Moreover, the studies also corroborate a direct implication of our hypothesis that a misfit within the same persuasive appeal (i.e., between verbal and nonverbal communication) might attenuate the impact of an influence strategy. In both studies, a misfit rendered either the DITF technique ([Experiment 1](#)) or the DTR technique ([Experiment 2](#)) no more effective than their respective control scripts. In addition, the results of [Experiment 2](#) also point to the suggestion that the non-fitting appeal produced lower compliance rates than the condition where the DTR was delivered in a neutral nonverbal style, although the difference did not reach significance. Hence, future studies might include more fine-grained indices of behavioral compliance, such as actual number of products purchased to provide converging evidence for the notions outlined in the present paper. Nevertheless, the present results attest to the observation that although at first glance, vigilant, avoidance-oriented nonverbal behavior may be expected to hinder persuasion, it may actually do the opposite and boost it, at least to the extent that it is in congruence with the key orientation of the influence strategy used.

The present research extends work on the persuasive impact of regulatory fit (e.g., [Cesario & Higgins, 2008](#); [Lee & Aaker, 2004](#)) to influence settings of fit (and misfit) within a single persuasive

attempt. Moreover, it is among the first studies to demonstrate the pivotal role of the interplay between verbal and nonverbal communication in this process. Nevertheless, future studies might also take the recipient's regulatory focus into account. It might well be that the present effects might even be more pronounced when there is an additional source of fit present, i.e., between the joint orientation of the appeal and that of the recipient.

In addition, the present two experiments provide a first direct empirical test of the approach-avoidance orientation distinction in social influence strategies ([Knowles & Linn, 2004](#)) by zooming-in on one of the more important implications of that distinction; the match/mismatch with nonverbal cues. Attesting to the viability of the approach-avoidance model, our results indeed show that approach-oriented strategies may benefit from being delivered in approach-associated (i.e., eager) nonverbal style, whereas the opposite holds for avoidance-oriented strategies.

The observation that in both studies, a mismatch between nonverbal and verbal communication rendered the influence attempt ineffective in producing compliance also illustrates an important practical implication of the findings. Influence agents such as sales representatives, fundraisers and political candidates might be well advised to pay close attention to the nonverbal delivery style of their persuasive messages. Furthermore, ascertaining approach-avoidance fit between verbal and nonverbal communication appears more important in this respect than merely smiling, and appearing active and alert. Indeed, in contrast to the well-known marketing truism that an active, smiling, and eager style brings selling success, this is only half the story and may even backfire when such a style is at odds with the orientation of the influence strategy used. A more cautious, strategy which communicates vigilance, rather than eagerness, may be similarly beneficial in fostering persuasion and compliance, at least to the extent that it is in accordance with the type of influence strategy used.

As a final observation, the present results also nicely align with the established observation that most influence strategies work best under conditions of consumer automaticity and mindlessness ([Cialdini, 2009](#); [Fennis et al., 2009](#)). That is, under these conditions of reduced mental alertness, many influence techniques evoke the use of heuristic principles as a simple shortcut to choice and decision-making. Research on persuasion has shown that congruence vs. incongruence of various verbal and nonverbal elements within a single persuasive message may affect the extent of experienced mindlessness (e.g., [Smith & Shaffer, 1995](#); [Ziegler, Diehl, & Ruther, 2002](#)). That is, incongruent message elements – for example a majority source that argues for a counterattitudinal position ([Baker & Petty, 1994](#)); a source that presents compelling message arguments, but in a slow-paced way ([Smith & Shaffer, 1995](#)); or a source that is high on expertise, but low on position certainty ([Karmarkar & Tormala, 2010](#)) – may prompt recipients to process the message more in depth, thus reducing the extent of mindlessness. In contrast, congruent message elements do the opposite and reduce the extent of message processing. In line with these notions, a condition of fit between verbal and nonverbal communication may procure consumer mindlessness, in contrast to a condition of non-fit, thus fostering the conditions in which many approach and avoidance-oriented influence strategies may flourish. Future research might explore these notions more in depth, for example by recording decision times as an indicator of mindless (or mindful) persuasion.

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