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University Students' Perceptions on Smiles from Strangers of Different Gender

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ABSTRACT

Communication involves verbal and nonverbal communication. However, many people pay less attention to nonverbal communication as people focus more on verbal communication without realizing that human use nonverbal communication as much as using verbal communication in daily life (Lunenburg, 2010). Interestingly, there are differences in showing expressions between male and female (Hess, Adams & Kleck, 2004). Smile is one of the facial expressions that people frequently use in daily life. The differences in showing emotions between male and female can simply be seen through smile and interpretation of smile. This study will present a thematic analysis on differences of interpretation of smile from strangers between male and female. This study aimed to explore on how different gender perceive smile from strangers as well as cultural influences on interpretation of smile. Participants of this study are undergraduates from local and private universities in Malaysia. The participants were selected through purposive sampling technique and followed by snowball sampling technique. From the analysis, it shows that there are a slight difference in interpretation of smile between male and female. The analysis also found that family's upbringing, religion, environment and culture does influence an individual's interpretation of smile from strangers. However, it is suggested for the future research to widen the target participants and use face-to-face interview as a method to collect the data.

Keywords: interpersonal communication, nonverbal communication, smiles, gender study

INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal communication is a way of communication that we use in our daily life. It is basically a face-to-face process of conveying messages, feelings and emotions through writing, listening, verbal and nonverbal cues. Interpersonal communication is not only about the messages conveyed, but also include the how the messages conveyed and delivered from the sender to receiver. According to Lunenburg (2010), human communicate through nonverbal as much as using verbal.

Nonverbal communication as well plays an important role either in a situation where speech is not allowed as well as when communicating using verbal. In a situation where speech is not allowed, the sender can use nonverbal cues to communicate with the receiver. It can be done

through facial expressions, hand gestures, body posture and other body language. Meanwhile, in a situation where speech are available, nonverbal cues can be used to create a better and more effective communication.

According to Lunenburg (2010), nonverbal communication consists of four elements. The four elements are kinesics, proxemics, paralanguage as well as chronemics. Generally, kinesics is about body movement, gestures, postures, eye movement, facial expressions and others. Nonverbal communication conveys a lot of information and different elements of nonverbal communications provide different information of someone's emotions and feelings. Facial expressions are one of the type of kinesics that carry a lot of information. Usually facial expressions are involving with emotions as the muscle of the face are triggered to react when someone is having an emotion. Facial expressions consist of six universal expressions, where it is known as common expressions around the world. The six universal expressions are sadness, happiness, fear, anger, surprise and lastly, disgust.

Smiling is one of facial expressions that is used frequently in our daily life. Smile also always associated with positive things like happiness, warmth and being friendly. Smile can be either fake or genuine depending on the way that person smile. Generally, every person has their own interpretation about things around them and this is including verbal communication and nonverbal cues. According to Briton and Hall (1995), there are gender differences exist in both verbal communication and nonverbal cues. It is supported by a study done by Kramer (1977), he stated there are also differences in nonverbal cues between men and women. As example, women use hands and face to express feelings and emotions more frequent compared to men. Meanwhile, men are less talkative compared to women.

Apart from that, culture is another essential element in shaping one's behavior and it will continue ran in the generation as passed down by the ancestor. According to Matsumoto (2006), culture is a behavior that is successive that consist of guidance and assistance on way of life transmitted from one generation to another younger generation. Culture has a great influence in both verbal and nonverbal communication. Previous studies have found differences in nonverbal gesture on different culture especially in facial expressions. To support, according to Cruz (2001), there are variety styles of nonverbal communication depending on the culture.

However, most of the people did not recognize the differences between their own culture and others. This situation is known as projected similarity. Projected similarity causes miscommunication and misinterpretation on nonverbal communication when a person from different culture communicate with a person from another culture. It is all because not all culture shares the same meaning of nonverbal communication as different culture perceive verbal and nonverbal communication differently.

This paper will explore on how different gender interpret smile from a stranger to discover if there are any differences in interpreting smile between men and women as well as to see if there is influence from their culture. Specifically, this paper tries to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the perception of male and female on smile from strangers?
2. How would the perception differ between male and female?
3. Does culture influence an individual's interpretation on smile from strangers?
4. How does culture influence interpretation of an individual on smile from strangers?

METHODOLOGY

Since the objective of this study is to explore the perceptions and opinions on smiles from a stranger, this research uses a qualitative research approach, with exploratory research design. A 10-questions self-completed survey was used in this study (see Appendix 1). The participants were thirty-five undergraduates from local and private universities in Malaysia. The participants were chosen using two different sampling techniques. The process of selection starts with purposive sampling technique, where the researcher purposely approached undergraduates from her contact list. Next, snowball sampling technique was used to reach the potential participants through the participants obtained from the first sampling technique. The data collected were then being analyzed using thematic analysis.

RESULTS

There were 35 undergraduates from local and private universities participated in this study, from which 21 were female, and 14 were male. Out of this number, there were four international students participated in this study. Table 1 below illustrates the participants' gender, nationality and race.

Table 1: Gender, nationality and race of the participants

Nationality	Gender	Race	No. of Participant
Malaysia	Male	Malay	10
		Chinese	1
		Indian	1
		Other	0
	Female	Malay	13
		Chinese	4
		Indian	1
		Other	1
China	Male	N/A	1
	Female		1
Indonesia	Male	N/A	1
	Female		1
			TOTAL: 35

Based on the analysis, most of the participants agreed that smiling to strangers portray manners and positive gestures of an individual. It shows that an individual have respect towards others. Comparing the number of male and female participants who agreed that smiling to strangers involves attitude, the number of female participants who agreed are higher than the number of male participants who agreed. There are 17 participants who agreed that smile from strangers reflect an individual attitude. Among the 17 participants, 7 of them are male participants. Among the answers given by the male participants of this study are "common and shows respect towards an individual" (MP7), and "smile from strangers reflect an individual's friendliness" (MP5 and MP14). Female participants of this study also have positive attitude towards smiles from a stranger. FP18, for

example, stated that smile from strangers “can spread positive vibes.” However, 4 female participants claimed that it is uncommon to smile at strangers. F19, for example, stated that it is unnecessary to smile at strangers in public, meanwhile, FP23 and FP29 asserted that it is weird and awkward to smile at strangers.

As for the second research question (How would the perception differ between male and female?), most of the participants had a positive opinion on interpretation of smile from strangers of their own gender. MP2, MP3 and MP9 considered strangers who smiled to them as friendly. However, MP5 asserted that when a male smiles at him while he is with his girlfriend, the smile could be interpreted as friendly, but intimidating at the same time. Female participants also had very positive interpretation of smiles from a stranger of their same gender. Such smile could be associated with being friendly, and further creates positive impression of the stranger. Nevertheless, one male participant claimed that it is awkward to receive smile from a male stranger.

The participants were also asked about their interpretation of smiles from strangers of their opposite gender. Ten of the participants interpreted smile from stranger of their opposite gender as flirty. Interestingly, the number of male participants who agreed with the previous statement are higher than the number of female participants. These participants stated that they feel the stranger are being flirty, admiring and seducing them through the smiles. Two of the female participants stated that such smile could make them feel uncomfortable. On the other hand, eight participants had positive impression of the strangers of the opposite gender who smiles at them. A male participant, MP8, claimed that when a stranger of the opposite gender smile to him, it shows that the stranger is a nice and kind person. The stranger also is considered as friendly as usually female does not simply smile to strangers. FP18 asserted that when a stranger of the opposite gender smile to her for few seconds, she assumes that the stranger are just being polite. However, if the stranger smile and look at her for few minutes, she would interpret the smile as something scary.

The next research question seeks to find out if the participants’ interpretation of smiles from strangers are influenced by their family’s upbringing and their religion. From the data collected, majority of the participants agreed that family’s upbringing and religion influence their interpretation on smile from strangers. Among the 35 participants, more than 20 participants stated agreed on the influence of family’s upbringing and religion in their interpretation on smile from strangers. As an example, FP18 specifically mentioned that since her siblings are all female, she would feel quite awkward and uncomfortable receiving smile from the opposite gender. However, she also stated that in Islam, smiling is considered as a charity that a Muslim can do to gain reward, so she would practice the act of smiling to strangers including smile to the opposite gender. On the other hand, FP27 mentioned that her parents always remind her to not be too comfortable with men, hence, she would always be cautious in things related to the opposite gender, including smiling.

The participants were also asked if the surrounding affects the way they interpret smile from strangers. FP18 claimed that smile from strangers and smiling to strangers in the campus is common and normal. However, FP27 specifically mentioned if she is in a secluded area and a stranger suddenly smile to her, she will definitely interpret the smile as something that is negative and scary.

The next research question seeks to find out if the participants’ culture influences their interpretation of smiles from strangers. From the data collected, it has been found that 16 out of 35

participants disagreed that culture influence their interpretation on smile from strangers. The rest of the participants agreed that culture influenced interpretation on smile from strangers. They agreed that culture creates stereotypes among the society's members. MP11 specifically mentioned on how a society creates a stereotype of to not simply talk and even smile to strangers because the strangers might have a bad intention. Interestingly, MP2 and MP11 both stated that culture influences interpretation on smile from strangers through media, specifically films and dramas.

DISCUSSION

Both male and female shared the same opinion in associating the act of smiling at strangers with an individual's attitude, create a positive impressions and also spreading positive vibes. However, comparing between both genders, more male participants viewed smile from strangers as something that is common and normal compared to female participants. Interestingly, no male participants asserted that it is uncommon to smile at strangers while there are female participants who claimed that it is uncommon to smile at strangers on the street especially to those strangers of different gender simply because they do not feel uncomfortable to smile to unknown individual. These findings are similar to previous study. It is found that women and men reacts differently towards nonverbal cues. Women are more aware and sensitive towards nonverbal cues compared to men (Mehu, Little & Dunbar, 2008). To support, it is also found that level of sensitivity of men and women might cause the differences in interpreting nonverbal cues (Krys et al., 2013).

Other than that, it can be seen from the findings the number of male participants who interpret smile from stranger of opposite gender as flirty, seducing and admiring are higher compared to female participants. Most of the male participants stated that they feel and assume the stranger of opposite gender are attracted and admiring them as well as trying to seduce them. These findings are parallel with the previous studies. Previous studies have found that men find women who smile as attractive and it helps to increase the possibility of a woman to be approached by a man (Gueguen, 2008).

According to Matsumoto (2007), cultural influences are created via adaptation process of connection of human nature and ecology. It explains the significant relationship of human with environment and culture. Several participants of this current study asserted that the environment where they were brought up and the current environment that they lived in also influence their interpretation on smile from strangers. Being raised up and living in an environment of positive and harmony surrounding has help them to be positive as well.

IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study help to enhance the comprehension on the opinion of some part of the society as well as explore the gender differences that exist in this country. The interpretation of smile from strangers among the Malaysians does not show any differences despite their different religion, races and culture. This discovery shows that differences in interpretation on smile from strangers across culture among undergraduates in Malaysia are almost zero.

Parents play an important role in educating children as children learn through imitation and role modelling. Hence, it is the responsible of the parents to teach their children to practice the

small gesture such as smiling. It is one of the easiest way to communicate nonverbally with others. Apart from that, it is suggested for those who work in customer service field to understand the importance of their facial expressions especially smile during working. It is important for those who are working in customer service line to know how powerful a smile can be as their works requires them to interact with strangers known as customers. However, generally everyone need to know and understand the power and importance of nonverbal cues as it is part of communication skills.

It is recommended to widen the target participants in order to reach a bigger scale of participants and responses for the future research. Wider and bigger target participants are able to generate more and variety responses to be analyzed and discussed. Instead of undergraduates, it is suggested for the future research to reach participants of different background as well including different education background, financial background and more. For instance, teachers, lecturers and others. Other than that, in order to generate in depth responses from the participants, it is recommended to use face-to-face interview. Face-to-face interview are able to help the interviewer to gain in depth answers from the participants as two-way communication can be done for the interviewer to assist the participants.

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APPENDIX I: SELF-COMPLETED QUESTIONNAIRE

SECTION A: DEMOGRAPHIC SECTION

Gender: Male Female
Jantina: Lelaki Perempuan

Nationality/ Kewarganegaraan:

Malaysian/Warga Malaysia

Non-Malaysian/Bukan Warganegara

Please state your race:

Malay/Melayu
 Chinese/Cina
 Indian/India
 Other/Lain-lain: _____

Please state your nationality:

SECTION B

Answer ALL questions below. Please indicate reasons for each “Yes” or “No” questions.
Jawab semua soalan di bawah. Sila nyatakan sebab bagi setiap soalan “Ya” atau “Tidak”.

1) What is your opinion on smiling at a stranger?

Apakah pendapat anda tentang senyuman terhadap orang yang tidak dikenali?

2) Do you smile at a stranger you met on the street? Please explain.

Adakah anda senyum apabila terjumpa dengan orang yang tak dikenali? Sila jelaskan.

Yes/Ya No/Tidak

3) How do you interpret a smile from a stranger of your own gender?

Bagaimanakah anda mentafsir senyuman daripada orang yang tidak dikenali yang sama jantina dengan anda?

4) How do you interpret a smile from a stranger of the opposite gender?

Bagaimanakah anda mentafsir senyuman daripada orang yang tidak dikenali yang berlawanan jantina dengan anda?

5) Do you think your family's upbringing and religion influence your interpretation of a smile from a stranger? Please explain.

Adakah anda berpendapat bahawa didikan keluarga dan agama anda mempengaruhi tafsiran anda terhadap senyuman daripada orang yang tidak dikenali? Sila jelaskan.

Yes/Ya No/Tidak

6) Do you think your environment influences your interpretation of a smile from a stranger? Please explain.

Adakah anda berpendapat bahawa persekitaran anda mempengaruhi tafsiran anda terhadap senyuman daripada orang yang tidak dikenali? Sila jelaskan.

Yes/Ya No/Tidak

7) Why would you interpret a smile from a stranger in a positive way?

Mengapa anda mentafsir senyuman daripada orang yang tidak dikenali secara positif?

8) Why would you interpret a smile from a stranger in a negative way?

Mengapa anda mentafsir senyuman daripada orang yang tidak dikenali secara negatif?

9) Do you think culture influences your interpretation of a smile from a stranger? Please explain.

Adakah anda berpendapat bahawa budaya mempengaruhi tafsiran anda terhadap senyuman daripada orang yang tidak dikenali? Sila jelaskan.

Yes/Ya No/Tidak

10) How does culture influence your interpretation of a smile from a stranger?

Bagaimanakah sesebuah budaya mempengaruhi tafsiran anda terhadap senyuman daripada orang yang tidak dikenali?
