

# **Learning Social Conduct: An Application of Behavioral Psychology and Nonverbal Communication to Business Advertising and Politics**



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## **Abstract**

This article investigates how we subconsciously learn and mimic social conduct from a young age from the people around us, and how this observational learning can be adapted to adult learning. It explores how people often make the wrong first impressions when faced with new cultures or new experiences by providing an analysis for how we learn social conduct with a focus on behavioral psychology, cultural context, nonverbal communication, and body language. It also examines unspoken communication strategies with application to business advertising and politics, in particular rude luxury brand salespeople and the first televised presidential debate in the United States. This article concludes with recommendations for how people can improve nonverbal communication and body language as adults, shifting from subconscious to active learning in an ever-evolving global environment.

## **Key Words**

Behavioral Psychology, Nonverbal Communication, Cultural Context, Child Mimicry, Body Language Misinterpretation, International Political Business Communication, Empathy

## Seven Seconds to Make a First Impression

“We have all experienced, consciously or subconsciously, that the spoken words are but one element of the conveyed message. Along with the words we notice the intonation of the voice, the rhythm and speed, the speaker’s expressions and body language. Many times, the non-verbal cues and signs carry a greater influence on the listener than the spoken word.”<sup>1</sup>  
Tuvya T. Amsel

Experts say that it only takes seven seconds for people to make their first impression.<sup>2</sup> Did they make the right impression? How do they know? How often do people make the wrong first impression when faced with a new culture simply because they are uninformed or unfamiliar with it? How does one bridge the gap in understanding through physical self-awareness and unspoken communication strategies? Understanding how to improve self-marketing and make better impressions is a lifelong effort. Many things about oneself cannot be changed, but what *can* be improved is nonverbal communication, or in other words: body language. “Body movements, facial expressions, vocal tone and volume, and other signals are collectively known as body language,”<sup>3</sup> which includes microexpressions and hand gestures. “By the term nonverbal communication, we understand all communicative acts that are performed without words,”<sup>4</sup> but are all detected and analyzed either consciously or subconsciously. How others interpret someone’s body language is how they will be perceived vocally too. Without it, people are unable to understand each other, cooperate, or promote the development of human society.<sup>5</sup>

While verbal communication is commonly improved upon, nonverbal communication is a crucial skill that few people attempt to consciously improve. Regardless of how fast people can speak, people are always able to think *faster*, therefore these silent cues are critical. As Professor

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<sup>1</sup> Tuvya T. Amsel, “An Urban Legend Called: ‘The 7/38/55 Ratio Rule,’” *European Polygraph* 13, no. 2 (June 1, 2019): 95–99, <https://doi.org/10.2478/ep-2019-0007>.

<sup>2</sup> Serenity Gibbons, “You and Your Business Have 7 Seconds to Make a First Impression: Here’s How to Succeed,” *Forbes*, June 19, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/serenitygibbons/2018/06/19/you-have-7-seconds-to-make-a-first-impression-heres-how-to-succeed/>.

<sup>3</sup> “Body Language,” *Psychology Today*, July 22, 2024, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/body-language>.

<sup>4</sup> Mark L. Knapp and Judith A. Hall, *Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction*, 7th ed., (Cengage Learning, 2009), 23.

<sup>5</sup> Haiyan Wang, “Nonverbal Communication and the Effect on Interpersonal Communication,” *Asian Social Science* 5, no. 11 (October 19, 2009): 155-59, <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v5n11p155>.

Judee Burgoon, of the University of Arizona explains in her research on nonverbal signals, “in each conversation, the feelings between speakers are not only transferred through the verbal content, but by 60-65% by their posture”<sup>6</sup> and body language. While one cannot stop people from making quick judgments, one can apply an understanding of how people *make* those decisions to work in one’s favor.<sup>7</sup>

In his *Talking to Strangers* Malcolm Gladwell explains the importance of communicating with strangers. He writes that “something is very wrong with the tools and strategies we use to make sense of people we don't know. And because we don't know how to talk to strangers, we invite conflict and misunderstandings.”<sup>8</sup> He argues that despite considering ourselves relatively good at reading people, the opposite is true. There are thousands of courses on improving public speaking that teach changing tone or diction. Yet, nonverbal communication is a more subconscious behavior that few try to change beyond the obvious, even though everything matters when it comes to nonverbal cues.

It is easier to verbally deceive someone than it is to change subconscious body language signals, which is why many people tend to believe the latter more. In nonverbal communication, there are three main types of gestures: adaptors, emblems, and illustrators.<sup>9</sup> Adaptors are movements that involve touch, usually resulting from anxiety, such as finger tapping, or pen shaking. Emblems are gestures that have a specific agreed-on meaning. These are different from signs in sign language since they are not part of a formal sign system like ASL (American Sign Language), but rather a cultural system. Emblems can “be still or in motion; for example, circling the index finger around at the side of your head says ‘They are crazy,’ or rolling your hands over

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<sup>6</sup> Judee K. Burgoon, “Nonverbal Signals,” in M.L. Knapp and G.R. Miller, eds., *Handbook on Interpersonal Communication*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Beverly Hills, 1994), 229–285.

<sup>7</sup> Carol Kinsey Goman, “5 Ways Body Language Impacts Leadership Results,” *Forbes*, August 26, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carolkinseygoman/2018/08/26/5-ways-body-language-impacts-leadership-results/>.

<sup>8</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, *Talking to Strangers: What We Should Know about the People We Don't Know* (Little, Brown and Company, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (McGraw-Hill Humanities, Social Sciences & World Languages, 1999), 36.

and over in front of you says ‘Move on,’”<sup>10</sup> but since they are so dependent on many factors, the meaning of each emblem does not transfer well across cultures. Illustrators are more common and are used to illustrate any verbal message, such as someone using their hands to indicate the shape of an object that they are verbally describing. However, illustrators, unlike emblems, do not “typically have meaning on their own and are used more subconsciously.”<sup>11</sup> This article primarily focuses on emblems and illustrators, since we learn them from our peers from an early age. Adaptors are less culturally based and not as misunderstood, though adaptors still play a significant role in forming perceptions of others.

In an increasingly global society, people frequently face various cultures, decisions, and opinions that differ greatly from their own. Yet, they are not equipped with the proper tools to handle this globalization. As a result, they often make the wrong first impression or read others far differently than that person might intend. This leads to miscommunication and misunderstandings, with one or both parties leaving the interaction aggrieved. As researcher Haiyan Wang notes in *Nonverbal Communication and the Effect on Interpersonal Communication*, “We often try to understand one’s heart thoroughly and make important judgments and decisions to others according to nonverbal behaviors.”<sup>12</sup> Learning how to talk to those one does not know is crucial in a global society.

Wang highlights the different ways people are perceived without a single word being spoken. Body behavior evokes the use of the term ‘kinesics,’ which refers to the “study of hand, arm, body, and face movements. Specifically, the use of gestures, head movements and posture, eye contact, and facial expressions as nonverbal communication.”<sup>13</sup> Initial interactions with strangers can be heavily improved upon by understanding how one is perceived by others. This applies to businesses too; they only have a few seconds to make their impression on the customer,

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<sup>10</sup>“4.2 Types of Nonverbal Communication,” in LibreTexts, *Communication in the Real World – An Introduction to Communication Studies*.” Open Education Resource Libre Texts Project, 2025.

<sup>11</sup> “4.2 Types of Nonverbal Communication.”

<sup>12</sup> Wang, “Nonverbal Communication,” 155–59.

<sup>13</sup> “4.2 Types of Nonverbal Communication.”

no matter what they might be selling. Whether it is a pastry at a bakery or an online purchase, first impressions highly influence people's economic behaviors. Understanding how to market these products better translates into learning how to better market yourself and make better first impressions. It may be a lifelong effort, but trying to understand how people of different backgrounds, experiences, and ages might view things differently is extremely helpful and applicable to behavioral adjustments. "Many messages and meanings are expressed through touch, eye contact and gaze, slight diversity of tone, gesture and facial expressions with or without the help of verbal behaviors."<sup>14</sup> Studies have shown that we subconsciously and often unintentionally teach ourselves how to behave by observing and analyzing those around us. What we learn from each other, however, is often wrong and leads to many miscommunications, both inter-culturally and cross-culturally.

### **How People Learn to Behave Through Mimicry**

"Our speech-oriented culture is beginning to take note of the profound and overlooked contribution of nonverbal and implicit verbal behavior to the processes of communication. This contribution of our actions and ways of saying things, rather than our words, is especially important since it is inseparable from the feelings that we knowingly or inadvertently project in our everyday social interaction, and since it determines the effectiveness and well-being of our intimate, social, and working relationships. Indeed, in the realm of our feelings, our facial and vocal expressions, postures, movements, and gestures are so important that when our words contradict the messages contained within them, others mistrust what we say—they rely almost completely on what we do."<sup>15</sup>

Albert Mehrabian

Most people learn how to behave through example from an early age, either in the form of adult figures, such as parents, teachers, and family members, or through peers and classmates. Observational learning is largely subconscious when it comes to body language and is heavily influenced from a young age. Often, we are "unaware of our participation in interpersonal, nonverbal communication because these actions are inherent to how we converse as humans and

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<sup>14</sup> Wang, "Nonverbal Communication," 155–59.

<sup>15</sup> Albert Mehrabian, *Silent Messages: Implicit Communication of Emotions and Attitudes* (Wadsworth Pub Co., 1981).

are ingrained into our daily lives.”<sup>16</sup>

## **Reflecting Behavior: Mirror Neurons**

When we observe an action performed by another, we typically receive two vital pieces of information: the action that has been taken and the reason behind it. These observations are made from a region of the brain called mirror neurons, which are one of the most important new discoveries in neuroscience.<sup>17</sup> Researchers at the University of Parma in Italy found in the late 1980s that the “brain cells of macaque monkeys fired in the same way whether they were making a particular motion, or watching another monkey make that movement. In terms of motor cell activity, the monkey’s brain could not tell the difference between actually doing something and seeing it done.”<sup>18</sup> They concluded that these cells, named mirror neurons, occur very similarly in humans, where they “not only simulate actions, but also reflect intentions and feelings.”<sup>19</sup> Published medical research defines mirror neurons as a “variety of visuospatial neurons which indicate fundamentally about human social interaction, essentially responding to actions that we observe in others.”<sup>20</sup> Neuroscientific evidence presents the ability to mimic behaviors through these mirror neurons, as they “impact our ability to grasp new skills, acquire knowledge, and form deep emotional connections with those around us, even helping us understand why people do what they do.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Pauline Ashenden, “Nonverbal Communication: How Body Language & Nonverbal Cues Are Key,” *Lifesize*, March 5, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> The research and arguments presented in this article apply primarily to neurotypical individuals, because neurodivergence often exhibits different behaviors, particularly within nonverbal cues. Often, the body language of neurodivergent people will differ from the cultural norms of the individual’s background. See Sourya Acharya and Samarth Shukla, “Mirror Neurons: Enigma of the Metaphysical Modular Brain,” *Journal of Natural Science Biology and Medicine* 3, no. 2 (2012): 118-24, <https://doi.org/10.4103/0976-9668.101878>.

<sup>18</sup> Carol Kinsey Goman, *The Silent Language of Leaders: How Body Language Can Help--or Hurt--How You Lead* (John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 60.

<sup>19</sup> Goman, *Silent Language of Leaders*, 60.

<sup>20</sup> Acharya and Shukla, “Mirror Neurons,” 118–24.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Cook et al., “Mirror Neurons: From Origin to Function,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 37, no. 2 (April 1, 2014): 177–92, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0140525x13000903>.

Mirror neurons “facilitate our learning by enabling us to imitate and understand the actions and behavior of those we observe.”<sup>22</sup> This research concluded that the mirror neurons fire off in the same manner when we observe someone perform an action as when we subsequently perform that action ourselves. However, this has its limitations, as “mirror neurons do not provide us with an exact motoric coding of observed actions,”<sup>23</sup> yet they do support observation, visualization, and representation and are, therefore, a vital aspect of our learning.<sup>24</sup> This means that we are not able to mimic complex actions, such as replicating an entire piano musical sequence after watching it in concert once, especially without any former training, but it does mean that we subconsciously neurologically pick up and replicate nonverbal gestures as we develop and learn what cultural clues are necessary in our individual upbringings.

With this discovery, it is evident that mimicry begins very early. Researchers found that “human infant data using eye-tracking measures suggest that the mirror neuron system develops before 12 months of age,”<sup>25</sup> and that this data could help study the learning behaviors of older children and adults. Mirror neurons are a relatively new discovery in psychology, as before this, psychologists and scientists relied on behavioral experiments instead. As psychologist Dr. Paul Jenkins explains, the study of human behavior largely started with the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, who inspired the study of behaviorism with his view that “our eventual behavior was only a sign to the unconscious motivations driving it.”<sup>26</sup> Within the field of behaviorism, it has been largely theorized and believed for many years that most people learn their behaviors subconsciously. Unfortunately, “while Freud was an astute observer of nonverbal behavior, his theories developed more in relation to spoken communication.”<sup>27</sup> So instead, the next section examines the pioneering

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<sup>22</sup> Jeremy Sutton, “Mirror Neurons and the Neuroscience of Empathy,” *Positive Psychology*, September 7, 2023, <https://positivepsychology.com/mirror-neurons/#:~:text=While%20observing%20such%20emotional%2%20%200information,et%20al.%2C%202022>).

<sup>23</sup> Michael W. Eysenck and Mark T. Keane, *Cognitive Psychology: A Student’s Handbook* (Psychology Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315778006>.

<sup>24</sup> Sutton, “Mirror Neurons and Empathy.”

<sup>25</sup> Acharya and Shukla, “Mirror Neurons,” 118–24.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Jenkins, “Can Human Behavior Be Studied Scientifically?” *National University*, February 1, 2019, <https://nu.edu/blog/ask-an-expert-can-human-behavior-be-studied-scientifically/>.

<sup>27</sup> Regina Pally, “A Primary Role for Nonverbal Communication in Psychoanalysis,” *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 21, no. 1 (February 27, 2001): 71–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07351692109348924>.

nonverbal communication research that proved that children begin to learn and mimic behaviors very early on.

## **Silent Signals: Exploring Child Mimicry in the Still Face Experiment**

In 1975, Edward Tronick presented his *Still Face* experiment, during which a mother refused to engage with her infant for three minutes, despite the baby's best attempts to engage with her through smiles, giggles, body movements, and facial expressions. With the mother non-responsive and expressionless, the baby "rapidly sobers and grows wary. He makes repeated attempts to get the interaction into its usual reciprocal pattern. When these attempts fail, the infant withdraws [and] orients his face and body away from his mother with a hopeless facial expression."<sup>28</sup> Prior to these stone-faced three minutes, the mothers had engaged with their children, during which time researchers observed that the infants were mimicking the expressions and nonverbal behaviors of their mothers in the subsequent unresponsive three minutes.

The *Still Face* experiment has been frequently replicated by other researchers within behavioral and developmental psychology, since it proves that babies begin learning social cues from an extremely young age and that it is vital to their development to receive engagement and continued social reinforcement. All the subsequent experiments repeated this phenomenon, and it has become a "standard method for testing hypotheses about person perception, communication differences as a result of gender or cultural differences, individual differences in attachment style, and the effects of maternal depression on infants."<sup>29</sup> The experiment has been used to explore cross-cultural differences and examine techniques in behavioral development, but, most importantly, proves that humans begin learning and mimicking behaviors at an early age.

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<sup>28</sup> Edward Tronick et al., "The Infant's Response to Entrapment Between Contradictory Messages in Face-to-Face Interaction," *Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry* 17, no. 1 (December 1, 1978): 1–13, [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0002-7138\(09\)62273-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0002-7138(09)62273-1).

<sup>29</sup> Jason Goldman, "Ed Tronick and the 'Still Face Experiment,'" *Thoughtful Animal, Science Blogs*, October 18, 2010, <https://scienceblogs.com/thoughtfulanimal/2010/10/18/ed-tronick-and-the-still-face>.

## **Darwin's Insight: The Lasting Impact of 'The Expression of the Emotions'**

Charles Darwin is famous for being the father of evolution while he is less known for his work on facial expressions. His theories and experiments were some of the early observations on body language. In *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* Darwin analyzed “in great detail more than 70 different components and types of facial expressions, plus other non-facial gestures” which set humans and apes apart from other animals.<sup>30</sup> Darwin concluded that the expressions we make have not evolved to communicate solely a singular thing. He observed the behavior of his child, Doddy, who even at a young age, understood what certain expressions and movements by his caretakers and parents meant. This is a very early example—almost one hundred years prior—of what E. Tronick successfully proved in his *Still Face Experiment*: babies begin learning, decoding, and mimicking cultural nonverbal cues from a very young age.

Darwin concluded that “expressions only became meaningful when others read them as such, so the meaning of any so-called ‘emotional expression’ depends on context and other people.”<sup>31</sup> He theorized that unlike animals, humans do not inherently know what certain signals mean. We are not born with the instinctive knowledge of an expression; rather, it is taught to us culturally. Otherwise, nonverbal cues would be universal, and cross-cultural nonverbal miscommunications would be nonexistent.

Researchers emphasized that “his book presented a theory of *expression* rather than a theory of emotion. While he pioneered a modern physiological way of studying human movements, he found the meanings of such movements—whether emotional or not—to be inescapably social.”<sup>32</sup> Modern behavioral psychologists argue against this logic, as they theorize

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<sup>30</sup> Ben Bradley, “150 Years Ago, Charles Darwin Wrote About How Expressions Evolved – Pre-empting Modern Psychology by a Century,” *The Conversation*, n.d., <https://theconversation.com/150-years-ago-charles-darwin-wrote-about-how-expressions-evolved-pre-empting-modern-psychology-by-a-century-170880>.

<sup>31</sup> Bradley, “Charles Darwin.”

<sup>32</sup> Bradley, “Charles Darwin.”

that there *are* some universal expressions, such as anger, but this emotion can still be expressed and interpreted differently depending on the cultural context. Much “debate and research has been done to discover whether nonverbal signals are inborn, learned, genetically transferred, or acquired in some other way.”<sup>33</sup> Research concludes that there are gestures that fall into all of these categories, but for the purposes of this article, learned nonverbal signals will be the focus. Certain expressions, such as smiling, crying, and frowning, can be found everywhere, but the specific connotations with each are often cultural.

As Professor Albert Mehrabian notes, there are only a “very few basic dimensions of human emotions that are conveyed implicitly. These are variations in pleasure-displeasure, arousal-nonarousal, and dominance-submissiveness”<sup>34</sup> that are nearly universally displayed, but the rest are completely up to personal and cultural interpretation. Even the expressions that are generally universally received have limitations, as “smiling individuals are usually perceived more favorably than non-smiling ones—they are judged as happier, more attractive, competent, and friendly,”<sup>35</sup> but there are circumstances in societies “with high corruption indicators, trust toward smiling individuals is reduced,”<sup>36</sup> or in cultures where smiling too often is seen as baffling. Many studies have proven that smiling is received as a positive expression, but in some cultures, such as Russia, Poland, and Norway, there are anecdotes that claim that “smiling with no reason is a sign of stupidity.”<sup>37</sup>

## **Interpreting Communication: The 7%-38%-55% Rule**

Albert Mehrabian’s research is famous for his 7%-38%-55% rule in the field of verbal and

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<sup>33</sup> Barbara Pease and Allan Pease, *The Definitive Book of Body Language: The Hidden Meaning Behind People’s Gestures and Expressions* (Bantam, 2011), 17.

<sup>34</sup> Mehrabian, *Silent Messages*.

<sup>35</sup> Kuba Kryś et al., “Be Careful Where You Smile: Culture Shapes Judgments of Intelligence and Honesty of Smiling Individuals,” *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* 40, no. 2 (December 30, 2015): 101–16, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10919-015-0226-4>.

<sup>36</sup> Kryś et al., “Culture Shapes Judgments of Intelligence,” 101–16.

<sup>37</sup> Kryś et al., “Culture Shapes Judgments of Intelligence,” 101–16.

nonverbal communication. According to him, there are three elements to how people communicate their feelings: words, tone of voice, and facial expression.<sup>38</sup> Within these aspects, 7 percent is verbal, 38 percent is vocal (delivery), and 55 percent is facial.<sup>39</sup> His research explores the impact of these channels on the listener, termed the receiver, and analyzes the importance of different forms. As Mehrabian explains, “We may observe strangers conversing socially in a distant group, and, without being able to hear their words, can sometimes decide whom we like or dislike or form definite feelings and judgments as to the kinds of people they are.”<sup>40</sup> Once made, these judgments are hard to reverse. As earlier stated, people form their initial opinions of you within seven seconds,<sup>41</sup> and if our appearance and nonverbal speech mannerisms contribute so greatly to the impressions we make, then more time should be spent on improving and understanding them.

Mehrabian is the first to admit, however, that his research has been widely misinterpreted, as many believe that he is claiming that verbal communication is unimportant when it clearly plays a significant role in getting a message across. At its basic level, verbal communication cannot account for only 7%. He gives the example of telling someone that “the eraser you are looking for is in the right-hand drawer of my desk in my third-floor office.”<sup>42</sup> He concedes that the verbal direction cannot contribute to only 7% of the message in this example. For direct communication such as this, the verbal portion provides directions that could not be deduced through body language or delivery, and requires clear vocal information to be imparted.

However, since Mehrabian's research is primarily concerned with nonverbal communication, he emphasizes that most of human communication is not restricted to instances such as the one above, but rather more complex ones that need to use nonverbal communication for inference. Basic and direct forms of communication represent only one facet of our broader

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<sup>38</sup> Mehrabian, *Silent Messages*.

<sup>39</sup> Mehrabian, *Silent Messages*.

<sup>40</sup> Mehrabian, *Silent Messages*.

<sup>41</sup> Gibbons, “7 Seconds.”

<sup>42</sup> David Lapakko, “Communication Is 93% Nonverbal: An Urban Legend Proliferates,” *Communication and Theater Association of Minnesota Journal* 34, (Summer 2007): 7-19, <https://doi.org/10.56816/2471-0032.1000>.

communication methods. His research focuses instead on how people subconsciously perceive communication, using nonverbal clues to figure out how to receive a message. His formula does not apply to any singular conversation, but rather to communication as a whole.

## **Misconstrued Signals: Cultural Differences in Body Language**

According to Allan Pease's *The Definitive Book of Body Language*, "research shows that nonverbal signals carry about five times as much impact as the verbal channel and that, when the two are incongruent, people—especially women—rely on the nonverbal message and disregard the verbal content."<sup>43</sup> However, nonverbal signals are not impossible to change. This research highlights just how important it is to apply effort to improving the cultural understanding of these signals.

While we are highly sensitive to body language, we are unfortunately very unaware of our own reactions to it. We "may form a negative opinion about someone because he slouches, won't look us in the eye (or too intently), or stands too close to us when he speaks. Because we are unaware of how or why we made the judgement, we are unable to filter out our biases,"<sup>44</sup> which presents major issues when subconsciously reacting to people in different cultures. In an increasingly globally connected world, many endeavor to be more accepting of cultures that differ from their own. Verbally, they often achieve this goal, but the body language of inclusion often communicates differently.

Misinterpretations easily occur even within the same culture for a variety of reasons, but they happen even more easily when faced with "differences in gender, occupation, class, race, culture; as the messages and meanings of nonverbal behaviors become more complex."<sup>45</sup> Due to the frequent discrepancies in meaning, individuals are "better at recognizing and understanding

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<sup>43</sup>Pease and Pease, *Definitive Book of Body Language*, 17.

<sup>44</sup>Goman, *Silent Language of Leaders*, 60.

<sup>45</sup> Wang, "Nonverbal Communication," 155–59.

nonverbal cues from the members of their own cultural group compared to individuals from outside the group, due to the higher familiarity and exposure to nonverbal behaviors”<sup>46</sup> within their own cultures.

A meta-analysis study on the universality and cultural specificity of emotion recognition within and across cultures analyzed “22,148 participants from 43 different nations, 23 different ethnic groups, and a wide range of cultural backgrounds.”<sup>47</sup> The study noted that majority groups were far worse at accurately judging the emotions of minority groups than the reverse, due to the difference in exposure to each other. While emotions were “universally recognized at better-than-chances [over 50%], the accuracy of emotion recognition was significantly higher within the same cultural group.”<sup>48</sup>

It is impossible to figure out every single nonverbal cue, since for every one of the 270,000 gestures that we are capable of making, each can differ based on the factors outlined above, leading to millions of social cues that are impossible to fully learn.<sup>49</sup> Out of these 270,000 gestures that people make, several common ones get frequently misconstrued. Eye contact, and the lack of it, highlights the cultural sensitivity needed for interpreting the intention behind a stranger’s eyes. “Empirical studies have demonstrated that faces making eye contact are detected quickly and processed preferentially”<sup>50</sup> in many Western cultures, as for them “direct eye contact is often seen as a sign of confidence, attentiveness, and sincerity. However, in some Asian and Middle Eastern cultures, prolonged eye contact can be perceived as confrontational, disrespectful, or even aggressive.”<sup>51</sup> 11

Humans have a distinctly different structure of eyes compared to other primates, with a

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<sup>46</sup> Hio Tong Pang, Xiaolin Zhou, and Mingyuan Chu, “Cross-Cultural Differences in Using Nonverbal Behaviors to Identify Indirect Replies,” *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* 48, no. 2 (February 6, 2024): 323–44, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10919-024-00454-z>.

<sup>47</sup> Pang, Zhou, and Chu, “Cross-Cultural Differences,” 323-44.

<sup>48</sup> Pang, Zhou, and Chu, “Cross-Cultural Differences,” 323-44.

<sup>49</sup> Wang, “Nonverbal Communication,” 155–59.

<sup>50</sup> Hironori Akechi et al., “Attention to Eye Contact in the West and East: Autonomic Responses and Evaluative Ratings,” *PLOS One* 8, no. 3 (March 13, 2013): e59312, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0059312>.

<sup>51</sup> Quora, “How Body Language is Informed by Culture,” *Forbes*, October 23, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/quora/2023/10/23/how-body-language-is-informed-by-culture/>.

contrast between the white sclera and dark iris.<sup>52</sup> Humans use the information they glean from eye direction to maintain social relationships with one another, so “it has been proposed that the structure of the human eye evolved under the pressure of the need for coordinated behavior with others.”<sup>53</sup> Reflecting back to mirror neurons, and the early, infant-need for mimicry, people continue to search for cues from others to mimic behaviors throughout their entire lives,<sup>54</sup> both consciously and unconsciously, including eye contact, which is why the cultural differences in acceptable eye contact have such drastic effects.

Maintaining eye contact during social interaction is a more important principle for Western Europeans than for East Asians. For example, “Japanese children are taught to look at others’ necks because this way, the others’ eyes still fall into their peripheral vision.”<sup>55</sup> A study conducted by Shota Bono and Jari K. Hietanen in 2015, exploring different East versus West eye contact perceptions tasked Finnish and Japanese participants to “determine whether neutral faces with various gaze directions were looking at them. Further, participants rated the face stimuli for emotion and other affect-related dimensions.”<sup>56</sup> The results revealed that the Finnish participants were more likely to accept “greater deviations from the true eye contact” than their Japanese counterparts, likely due to the cultural desire for eye contact. The study revealed “cultural differences in the perception of emotion from neutral faces, and the bias in eye contact perception,”<sup>57</sup> showing how much of an influence your irises have on your interactions with others.

Other body signals continue to have various meanings depending on culture. In Western cultures, raised eyebrows “often signify surprise, interest, skepticism, or curiosity,”<sup>58</sup> while in Chinese culture, a “raised eyebrow can indicate joy, excitement, and pride.”<sup>59</sup> Similarly, in the

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<sup>52</sup> Shota Uono and Jari K. Hietanen, “Eye Contact Perception in the West and East: A Cross-Cultural Study,” *PLOS One* 10, no. 2 (February 25, 2015): e0118094, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0118094>.

<sup>53</sup> Uono and Hietanen, “Eye Contact Perception.”

<sup>54</sup> Goman, *Silent Language of Leaders*, 60.

<sup>55</sup> Uono and Hietanen, “Eye Contact Perception.”

<sup>56</sup> Uono and Hietanen, “Eye Contact Perception.”

<sup>57</sup> Uono and Hietanen, “Eye Contact Perception.”

<sup>58</sup> Pang, Zhou, and Chu, “Cross-Cultural Differences,” 323-44.

<sup>59</sup> Pang, Zhou, and Chu, “Cross-Cultural Differences,” 323-44.

West, pointing a finger is usually used to indicate something or to someone, while in the East, an open hand is used to refer to someone. Pointing at “someone with the index finger is often seen as confrontational and disrespectful”<sup>60</sup> in Chinese culture.

People are often conscious of their limitations in social communication and try to improve themselves; as a result, there are millions of works published on how to be better at social interactions. Many publications offer guidance to those at a loss, such as *The Cut* with their article “Do You Know How to Behave? Are You Sure?”<sup>61</sup> Another article is specifically geared towards all facets of life, and all the different relationships people have, it even contains a section dedicated to strangers, yet almost none of their tips focus on non-verbal communication.<sup>62</sup> People are constantly searching for more ways to fit in, but many do not take body language into account. Most self-help resources do not explore this avenue either. To date, “cross-cultural research on nonverbal communication has primarily focused on nonverbal behaviors in encoding and decoding emotions, and it remains unknown whether such an in-group advantage also exists in identifying indirect replies from nonverbal cues.”<sup>63</sup> This facet of communication seems largely ignored, and it is deepening the rift that misunderstandings can cause.

## **Application to Business, Sales, and Advertising**

“Synthesizing knowledge from psychology and marketing research, an understanding of nonverbal communication can help address when and how customers express their underlying feelings in retail interactions that are not evident in direct verbal expressions. Examining nonverbal behavior as an indirect measure of consumer response can enable retailers to better understand the needs of their customers.”<sup>64</sup>

Nancy Puccinelli

Body language holds significant value in sales, marketing, and advertising due to its ability

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<sup>60</sup> Pang, Zhou, and Chu, “Cross-Cultural Differences,” 323-44.

<sup>61</sup> The Cut, “Do You Know How to Behave? Are You Sure?” February 2, 2023, <https://www.thecut.com/article/tipping-rules-etiquette-rules.html>.

<sup>62</sup> Leil Lowndes. *How to Talk to Anyone: 92 Little Tricks for Big Success in Relationships* (Contemporary Books, 2003).

<sup>63</sup> Pang, Zhou, and Chu, “Cross-Cultural Differences,” 323-44.

<sup>64</sup> Nancy M. Puccinelli, et al., “Can You Trust a Customer’s Expression? Insights into Nonverbal Communication in the Retail Context,” *Psychology and Marketing* 27, no. 10 (September 14, 2010): 964–88, <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.20368>.

to convey implicit messages to the consumer. Within business interactions, “first impressions are crucial. Once someone mentally labels you as “trustworthy” or “suspicious,” “powerful” or “submissive,” everything else you do will be viewed through such a filter.”<sup>65</sup> If someone decides your body language is untrustworthy, they are unlikely to buy anything you try to sell. Body language and ‘correct’ nonverbal communication become crucial for making a sale and convincing consumers to open their wallets. A common contemporary business context where consumers frequently encounter nonverbal communication is sales and advertising since they are the quickest way to make an impression, but also the easiest in which to make inadvertent mistakes. In marketing, the severe competition for consumer attention results in nonverbal cues making the difference. The use of strategic body language can often be more effective than verbal persuasion to establish a connection with consumers, retain interest, and convey brand personality. It plays a crucial role in influencing consumer perceptions, and thus consumer behavior, since through nonverbal cues, marketers and advertisers can change a narrative and sell a story to sell a product. Effective utilization of body language lends credibility to the message or product, subconsciously leading consumers to interpret a message in the way the advertisers intended. However, cultural context plays a critical role in how it is received, and frequently, an advertisement or product fails due to its lack of contextualization.

In marketing and advertising, there is a distinction between high- and low-context communication, and this is important to consider when targeting a diverse market. High-context messages require a certain base of knowledge that is not universal, yet too often, the sender assumes that the receiver has the same or similar body of cultural information as they do and that they can interpret the message in the same way that they would. Just like in day-to-day communication, this is rarely the case. “The first set of mistakes we make with strangers—the default to truth and the illusion of transparency—has to do with our inability to make sense of the stranger as an individual. We do not understand the importance of the *context* in which the

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<sup>65</sup> Goman, “Body Language.”

stranger is operating,”<sup>66</sup> creating a major communication gap.

As Marieke De Mooij explains in her *Consumer Behavior and Culture: Consequences for Global Marketing and Advertising*, for people attempting to function in a foreign cultural setting who have to learn these social cues more suddenly, “nonverbal gestures are a critical facet of interpersonal communication that must be mastered to effectively navigate social situations.”<sup>67</sup> Often advertisers get it wrong, especially when advertising abroad. There are countless cultural factors to consider, and variations of communication styles. “Rapid speech rate, for example, suggests to Americans that the speaker makes true and uncensored statements, whereas for Koreans, slow speech implies careful consideration of others and context.”<sup>68</sup> Context can be lost in translation, and much of that is subtle cues as simple as ‘incorrect’ body language. A perceived message can turn out widely different from the intended one. Just as advertisers want their consumers to interpret their messages correctly, most people want the same out of their social interactions. They are constantly marketing themselves to other people, especially strangers who easily form, but haltingly change, their initial opinions.

Eye contact is a critical aspect of business communication too. “One body language myth to be aware of is that all bluffers will avoid looking into your eyes. Although some liars avoid or decrease eye contact, this behavior is widely known and fairly easy to control. In fact, many liars will overcompensate with too much eye contact,”<sup>69</sup> which makes people even more uncomfortable and unlikely to believe the lie they are being told.

For in-person business and sales, understanding personal space is vital to maintaining a connection with the customer. “Researchers sort the world into “contact cultures” (South America, the Middle East, Southern Europe) and “non-contact cultures” (Northern Europe, North America,

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<sup>66</sup> Gladwell, *Talking to Strangers*.

<sup>67</sup> Marieke De Mooij, *Consumer Behavior and Culture: Consequences for Global Marketing and Advertising* (SAGE Publications Limited, 2019).

<sup>68</sup> De Mooij, *Consumer Behavior and Culture*.

<sup>69</sup> Goman, *Silent Language of Leaders*, 40.

Asia)”,<sup>70</sup> which relates to how much personal space people from a culture typically find favorable, and how individuals use and interpret personal space.

For advertising and marketing, “visual elements serve as a universal language in native advertising, breaking through linguistic barriers and cultural boundaries,”<sup>71</sup> so brands have to be careful with advertisements that are designed for a diverse global audience. “The interpretation of gestures, body language, and facial expressions shifts dramatically across cultures. A thumbs-up gesture might convey approval in Western countries, but can be offensive in Middle Eastern regions.”<sup>72</sup> Meanwhile, in Asia, a double thumbs up can be a reference to Buddhism.

Jean-Marie Dru, Chairman of BDDP Group, a French advertising giant, wrote that “ads are the mirror of societies, they reflect their respective cultures. Globalization changes nothing.”<sup>73</sup> American ads reflect US culture, they are often brief and to the point, while “the Japanese share the French attraction to allegories, showing the brand in context. German ads seek to sell, they strive to convince. Norwegian advertising is characterized by crazy, random humor. In Asia, there is humility and a humanity that gives messages a very particular sensibility.”<sup>74</sup>

For in-person marketing, retail especially, open body language is crucial to making a sale and “teaching sales personnel to be friendly and responsive is supported by extant customer service research, which shows that retailers with friendly and welcoming sales staff will attract and retain loyal and satisfied customers.”<sup>75</sup> However, this is not always the case.

## **Do Rude Salespeople Boost Sales?**

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<sup>70</sup> Shraavya Kanungo, “Cultural Differences in Body Language for International Business Presentations | Simply Body Talk,” *Simply Body Talk*, March 17, 2025, <https://simplybodytalk.com/blog/cultural-differences-in-body-language/>.

<sup>71</sup> Kanungo, “Cultural Differences.”

<sup>72</sup> Kanungo, “Cultural Differences.”

<sup>73</sup> De Mooij, *Consumer Behavior and Culture*.

<sup>74</sup> De Mooij, *Consumer Behavior and Culture*.

<sup>75</sup> Dwayne D. Gremler and Kevin P. Gwinner, “Rapport-Building Behaviors Used by Retail Employees,” *Journal of Retailing* 84, no. 3 (August 16, 2008): 308–24, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretai.2008.07.001>.

At a basic level, most people have an innate desire to be liked, accepted, and respected.<sup>76</sup> As social creatures, we crave this type of connection with other people. As a Harvard Business Review case study on belonging and self-acceptance explains, “Sometimes that need is so strong, it drives us to alter our behaviors in exchange for approval.”<sup>77</sup> As such, much of the rationale that goes into buying luxury goods, especially luxury fashion, is based on how others will perceive you once you buy an expensive item. By toting around a handbag worth thousands of dollars, people are nonverbally attempting to signal their social class and wealth status.

However, while the expected demeanor of a salesperson is generally enthusiasm, studies show that “rude salespeople at luxury retailers actually boost sales.”<sup>78</sup> According to researcher Dr. Morgan Ward of the *Journal of Consumer Research*, the purchasing desires of customers treated rudely by salespeople at expensive stores often increase due to the subconscious need to ‘prove’ themselves and their wallet capabilities. This is exclusive to luxury products, as for non-luxury products, a rude salesperson is not of business advantage, since there is no implicit message conveyed in the purchased item. In Ward’s article, “Should the Devil Sell Prada? Retail Rejection Increases Aspiring Consumers’ Desire for the Brand,” the body language and cues of the salespeople deem the customer ‘inferior,’ which compels many people to want to buy more to show that they actually *can* afford luxury products. “Snobby associates reinforce the reputation of high-end, posh labels as privileged for the social elite,”<sup>79</sup> making the brand seem more unattainable and luxurious beyond just the price tag.

Many customers complained about this frequent practice in luxury sales, lamenting that it was turning them off from purchasing products at those stores for fear of being made to feel

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<sup>76</sup> Dds Dobson-Smith, “A Sense of Belonging Starts with Self-Acceptance,” *Harvard Business Review*, August 8, 2022, <https://hbr.org/2022/08/a-sense-of-belonging-starts-with-self-acceptance#:~:text=Humans%20are%20so%20%20cial%20creatures.,behaviors%20in%20exchange%20for%20approval>.

<sup>77</sup> Dobson-Smith, “Sense of Belonging.”

<sup>78</sup> Patrick M. Sheridan, “CNN Money: Rude Sales People Can Boost Luxury Sales,” *SMU Research*, May 15, 2014, <https://blog.smu.edu/research/2014/05/15/cnn-money-rude-sales-people-can-boost-luxury-sales/#:~:text=%20%20=Rude%20sales%20people%20at%20luxury,people%20at%20up%2Dscale%20stores>.

<sup>79</sup> Tom Ryan, “Study Finds Rude Associates Sell More in Luxury Stores,” *RetailWire*, May 12, 2014, <https://retailwire.com/discussion/study-finds-rude-associates-sell-more-in-luxury-stores/>.

inferior. In response to consumers' complaints and in an effort to boost sales, retailers instructed their sales personnel to be friendlier. This did not produce better sales, as being rude to customers actively helped luxury brands sell their products; a counterintuitive idea, but one that is backed by research. As Ward points out in her article, “prior research on social rejection supports the idea that rejection encourages people to elevate their perceptions of their rejecters and strengthens their predilection to affiliate with them.”<sup>80</sup> Many customers rationalized that the way to make the salesperson—and therefore, the luxury brand—accept and respect them would be to spend more money. In this way, luxury brands build a rapport with their customers and subconsciously induce them to buy more goods. Ward’s research proved that customers were far more willing to cooperate with rejection when it came from an aspirational brand associated with higher self-worth. “People’s self-concepts are defined and affirmed by the social groups that they belong to and feel accepted by; as such, they are highly motivated to remain positively perceived by important in-groups.”<sup>81</sup> If the product and brand were mass market, employee rudeness was received negatively and turned off customers.

However, the effect that rudeness produces luxury sales only proves true if “the salesperson appeared to be an authentic representative of the brand. If not, the consumer was turned off. You’ve got to be the right kind of snob in the right kind of store for the effect to work.”<sup>82</sup> This relates back to Albert Mehrabian’s 7%-38%-55% rule. Vocally, the salespeople are rude and dismissive, but if their body language, stance, and overall look is not portrayed well, people do not buy into the idea that they *need* the luxury item to make themselves appear better.

As this case shows, it is crucial to understand the consumer base in order to properly market a product. Body language for luxury brand sales people needs to be different than for other sales areas. In light of these considerations, cultural understanding is significant, particularly in

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<sup>80</sup> Morgan K. Ward and Darren W. Dahl, “Should the Devil Sell Prada? Retail Rejection Increases Aspiring Consumers’ Desire for the Brand,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 41, no. 3 (June 20, 2014): 590–609, <https://doi.org/10.1086/676980>.

<sup>81</sup> Ward and Dahl, “Retail Rejection,” 560-609.

<sup>82</sup> Ryan, “Rude Associates.”

industries where the success of a sale depends on navigating nuanced social cues and customer preferences. In some countries and some industries, a rude salesperson will result in zero sales and a customer that never returns. One of the major challenges in sales is understanding a customer's purchase intent, as many attempt to hide their true feelings for fear of seeming too excited, especially when it comes to purchases that often come down to negotiation.

If you display excessive excitement when approaching a car salesman, for instance, they can easily interpret your body language and might think that you are willing to accept a higher price. Revealing too much enthusiasm about your potential purchase can be counterproductive when it comes to negotiating the best price. As a result, it is better to present apathetic about the car, and “whether the salesperson takes your expression of indifference at face value or examines your behavior more closely to detect your underlying feelings may have a substantial impact on the outcome of the negotiation.”<sup>83</sup> However, it is important to note that body language plays a large role in utilizing bluffing as a sales tactic, as “when bluffing, people tend to reduce all nonverbal displays in the hope that their bodies won't “leak” the truth and expose the bluff,”<sup>84</sup> so people often behave less expressively, leading to subconscious signals picking up on the strangeness. In many companies, the “best employees often describe “reading” customers' nonverbal behavior as an important part of their service strategy,”<sup>85</sup> and understanding the context of all aspects of this exchange is crucial to both the sale and building a relationship between customer and brand.

## **How Politicians Change their Body Language**

“Leadership is the planet's most-observed yet least-understood phenomenon.”<sup>86</sup>  
Shane Goodwin, 2024

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<sup>83</sup> Puccinelli, et al., “Customer's Expression,” 964–988.

<sup>84</sup> Kinsey Goman, *Silent Language of Leaders*, 40.

<sup>85</sup> Puccinelli, et al., “Customer's Expression,” 964–988.

<sup>86</sup> Sam Eifling, “Speaker Series Explores What it Takes to Be a True Leader,” *SMU CoxToday*, January 16, 2024, <https://coxtoday.smu.edu/2024/01/16/leaders-on-leadership-speaker-series/>.

Within the realm of politics, nonverbal communication is essential to leaving the right impression. Politicians, diplomats, and other foreign nationals need to be able to adjust their body language indicating to the public that they should be trusted. Excellent communication skills are in high demand in this profession since much of the job requires a talent for public speaking, but to be a “good communicator it’s important to know not only how to be an eloquent speaker but to also know how to interpret and use nonverbal techniques effectively.”<sup>87</sup> Leaders must display outstanding nonverbal communication skills, “especially during crises and challenging periods of stress, fear, and uncertainty,”<sup>88</sup> when many turn to them for guidance or comfort. If a leader’s body language communicates unreliability, people are unlikely to count on them, or ever vote for them again. As stated earlier, it is easier to verbally mislead someone than it is to change subconscious body language signals, which is why many people tend to believe the latter more. As a result, politicians are often called ‘actors’ in a negative way, since many people accuse them of putting up a front, not saying or doing what they truly think. Successful politicians have a greater awareness of their own nonverbal signals, and “politicians on the campaign trail can obtain dramatically different results depending not so much on what they say but on how they say it.”<sup>89</sup> Just like actors who are taught to deliver lines in a passionate, yet believable way, politicians need to learn the same, or may “fail because of a bland vocal or facial expression,”<sup>90</sup> or be labeled completely deceitful.

Politicians need to focus on their body language and ensure that their nonverbal communication is in tandem with their spoken communication, given that politicians’ body language is “at least as influential as the verbal content of the message in determining how an

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<sup>87</sup> Kristin Kim and Abby Sun, “Body Language Cues Every Politician (and Voter) Should Know,” *Medill News Service*, August 18, 2011, <https://dc.medill.northwestern.edu/blog/2011/08/18/body-language-cues-every-politician-and-voter-should-know/#sth.ash.5HFM1huY.dpbs>.

<sup>88</sup> Robert H. Wicks et al., “Visual Presentation Style 1: A Test of Visual Presentation Styles and Candidate Evaluation During the First 2016 Presidential Debate,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 61, no. 5 (April 12, 2017): 533–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764217704317>.

<sup>89</sup> Mehrabian, *Silent Messages*.

<sup>90</sup> Mehrabian, *Silent Messages*.

individual is perceived.”<sup>91</sup> Therefore, to be successful, politicians *must* change themselves, but it is difficult to do so without seeming illegitimate. To elicit positive reactions from voters, politicians must change themselves effectively. This requires conscious effort in nonverbal cues and body language since this is how people make subconscious judgments. As Carol Kinsey Goman, a leadership strategy specialist, explains, “While you can’t stop people from making snap decisions—the human brain is hardwired in this way as a survival mechanism—you can understand how to make those decisions work in your favor”<sup>92</sup> and win support. Most politicians campaign just as much visually as they do verbally. While a voter might agree perfectly with a candidate’s ideas, if their body language does not inspire confidence, they might not be likely to vote for them. This is why politicians “give particular attention to the management of their body language and physical posture, since TV and TV screenings are the main promotion tool for their campaign.”<sup>93</sup> Physical presence subconsciously tells people how to feel about someone, and can quickly influence a voter.

## **The 1960 Presidential Debate**

One of the first major examples of widespread quick judgments was the first televised presidential debate in 1960 between the Democratic nominee John F. Kennedy and the Republican nominee Richard Nixon, which over two-thirds of the United States adult population witnessed. Today, Nixon is often viewed as a polarizing and untrustworthy figure due to his later scandals, such as Watergate. At the time, however, he was the successful and admired Vice President under Dwight D. Eisenhower. By comparison, Kennedy was merely a Massachusetts senator. Career-wise, Kennedy was the underdog.

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<sup>91</sup> Shawn W. Rosenberg et al., “The Image and the Vote: The Effect of Candidate Presentation on Voter Preference,” *American Journal of Political Science* 30, no. 1 (1986): 108–27, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2111296>.

<sup>92</sup> Goman, “Body Language.”

<sup>93</sup> Andreas Venetis, “The Importance of Body Language for Politicians,” LinkedIn, March 9, 2018, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/importance-body-language-politicians-andreas-venetis>.

To radio listeners, who heard his eloquent speech and knew of his extensive experience, Nixon was the clear winner, but to those who had watched it on TV, saw the “photogenic appeal of JFK versus the sickly look of his opponent, Nixon, who refused to wear makeup although his recent illness had left him with a pallid complexion.”<sup>94</sup> Due to this refusal, his beard stubble appeared very dark on camera, and blended with his suit on the black-and-white television broadcast, and the camera lights caused him to sweat, giving Nixon a poor appearance throughout the debate.<sup>95</sup> Even before they started speaking, Kennedy seemed composed, with his legs crossed and hands folded on his lap; the very picture of poise. Nixon kept shifting around in his seat, turning his head, folding and unfolding his hands, and gripping his chair.<sup>96</sup>

When Nixon went up to the podium, he spoke with a scowl and blinked rapidly throughout his opening remarks.<sup>97</sup> This alone might not have swayed the TV viewers who were listening to both men speak just as those on the radio were, but Kennedy maintained eye contact with the camera while answering questions. Nixon faced the journalists posing the questions. This strategy might have worked in the past, but Kennedy seemed to be aware that the real audience was behind a camera, an audience that was busy making incredibly quick judgments throughout the hour-long broadcast. Warmth and authority are two nonverbal cues essential to a winning candidate. “Warmth cues project likeability and candor and authority cues denote power and status. The most appealing politicians (at least from a body language standpoint) are those whose behaviors encompass both sets of signals.”<sup>98</sup> In this debate, Kennedy highlighted these nonverbal signals, and his direct and savvy approach made “viewers see him as someone who was talking right to

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<sup>94</sup> Carol Kinsey Goman, “The Body Language Winner of the Democratic Debate,” *Forbes*, October 14, 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carolkinseygoman/2015/10/14/the-body-language-winner-of-the-democratic-debate/>.

<sup>95</sup> John F. Kennedy Library Foundation, “TNC: 172 Kennedy-Nixon First Presidential Debate, 1960,” YouTube, September 21, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbrcRKqLSRw>.

<sup>96</sup> John F. Kennedy Library Foundation, “Kennedy-Nixon Presidential Debate.”

<sup>97</sup> John F. Kennedy Library Foundation, “Kennedy-Nixon Presidential Debate.”

<sup>98</sup> Goman, “Democratic Debate.”

them and giving straight answers.”<sup>99</sup> This, among other things, led to Kennedy’s victory. Richard Nixon would later go on to win a different presidential election. By then, he had certainly realized the importance of body language.

With the invention of broadcast networks, the art of public speaking transformed and required a different approach and a new set of skills. Subsequent politicians and diplomats were trained to signal differently through body language; today’s “political figures are fully aware of, and heavily coached on, the impact of nonverbal communication.”<sup>100</sup> This might seem superficial, but people’s subconscious reasoning is difficult to change, and for most, it is easier to try to appeal to those judgments than to change them entirely, especially when in a position where public opinion is deemed highly essential. Diplomats are less frequently in the public eye than politicians, but they are trained to be appealing and agreeable since political relations between countries often depend on their interactions with foreign nationals. They orchestrate deals and attempt to ensure that relationships remain peaceful. Especially in eras when instant or rapid communication between countries was not as frequent or even possible, diplomats were frequently one of the only connections to other countries. Ambassadors represent their countries abroad, but it is difficult to do so accurately and without causing strife. To be successful, they have to be able to read and correctly interpret context clues in a foreign country.

The gap in interpretation does not only span geographic and cultural differences. People with “opposing partisan views could even interpret the same body language differently,”<sup>101</sup> and this often leads to a heavy discourse on political opinions. The same candidate will be understood in a completely different way depending on what someone is looking for or wants. Often, people hear what they want to hear, and see what they want to see, and body language interpretation is no

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<sup>99</sup> Goman, “Democratic Debate.”

<sup>100</sup> Goman, “Democratic Debate.”

<sup>101</sup> NBC News, “Body Language: What McCain, Obama Reveal,” April 18, 2013, <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/body-language-what-mccain-obama-reveal-flna1c9460938>.

different: "Someone who wants a candidate who is going to be tenacious and stay the course, they're going to read the stability in movement signature as a positive thing, while someone who wants change is going to see that as immovable."<sup>102</sup>

Our brains allow us to decode and interpret so many silent signals, "the twitch of the eyebrow, the sincerity of the smile, the jut of the chin and the hand gestures to determine when someone is telling the truth, fibbing or just saying things that they think people want to hear."<sup>103</sup> Politicians have to be very specific and intentional about their body language if they want to be received well, since even a split second of hesitation can alert viewers to true feelings. "Our immediate facial expressions usually show our real emotions. But then, when we realize it, we often cover up that emotion quickly. And we usually cover it up with a smile. The first expression is real. The second is the coverup,"<sup>104</sup> and people can often subconsciously tell the difference and leave the interaction with a negative perception.

## **Recommendations on How to Improve Our Behavioral Learning Methods**

"Empathy plays a critical interpersonal and societal role, enabling sharing of experiences, needs, and desires between individuals and providing an emotional bridge that promotes prosocial behavior. This capacity requires an exquisite interplay of neural networks and enables us to perceive the emotions of others, resonate with them emotionally and cognitively, to take in the perspective of others, and to distinguish between our own and others' emotions."<sup>105</sup>  
Helen Riess

For neurotypical people, Acharya notes, many studies have independently established the connection between empathy and emotions to the mirror neuron system, since "people who are more empathic according to self-report questionnaires have stronger activations both in the mirror

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<sup>102</sup> NBC News, "What McCain, Obama Reveal."

<sup>103</sup> Brigid Schulte, "Body Language Experts Say Obama Exuded Dominance and Empathy," *The Washington Post*, May 18, 2013,

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/body-language-experts-say-obama-exuded-dominance-and-empathy/2013/02/13/7755207e-7590-11e2-95e4-6148e45d7adb\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/body-language-experts-say-obama-exuded-dominance-and-empathy/2013/02/13/7755207e-7590-11e2-95e4-6148e45d7adb_story.html).

<sup>104</sup> Schulte, "Obama Exuded Dominance and Empathy."

<sup>105</sup> Helen Riess, "The Science of Empathy," *Journal of Patient Experience* 4, no. 2 (May 9, 2017): 74–77, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2374373517699267>.

system for hand actions and the mirror stem for emotions, providing more direct support for the idea that the mirror system is linked to empathy.”<sup>106</sup> Hence, one possible way to get better at nonverbal communication and improve cultural body language understanding is to focus on increasing empathy. C. Daniel Batson’s study on *Using Empathy to Improve Intergroup Attitudes and Relations* notes that “social psychologists have given considerable attention to the possibility that empathy can be used to improve intergroup attitudes and relations.”<sup>107</sup> Even if we are increasingly living in cultural bubbles and surround ourselves with people like ourselves, there are many steps we can take to open our worldview and overcome this “empathy deficit.”<sup>108</sup>

Studies have shown that it is possible to increase empathy, and there are many exercises that people can do in “programs designed to improve intergroup relations, whether in protracted political conflicts, in educational settings, or via media.”<sup>109</sup> A six-year longitudinal study of medical students in Japan found that a “targeted educational program in communication skills training”<sup>110</sup> definitively enhanced empathy in medical students, but that additional reinforcement would likely be needed for a deeper and sustained effect.

One recommendation for learning empathy that stands out in an age where people spend a lot of time online, learning their behaviors from sources such as social media, movies, and TV shows, is reading books. “Writers, poets, playwrights, and philosophers have studied and written about human conduct that reflects a range of emotions, attitudes, and feelings through their nonverbal movements.”<sup>111</sup> While in most other avenues of modern media, there is the possibility of seeing the body language of the other person, all written work lacks that. Mehrabian wrote that

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<sup>106</sup> Acharya and Shukla, “Mirror Neurons,” 118-24.

<sup>107</sup> C. Daniel Batson and Nadia Y. Ahmad, “Using Empathy to Improve Intergroup Attitudes and Relations,” *Social Issues and Policy Review* 3, no. 1 (November 24, 2009): 141–77, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-2409.2009.01013.x>.

<sup>108</sup> Claire Cain Miller, “How to Be More Empathetic,” *The New York Times*, December 1, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/how-to-be-more-empathetic.html>.

<sup>109</sup> Batson and Ahmad, “Using Empathy.”

<sup>110</sup> Hitomi Kataoka et al., “Can Communication Skills Training Improve Empathy? A Six-year Longitudinal Study of Medical Students in Japan,” *Medical Teacher* 41, no. 2 (April 22, 2018): 195–200, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159x.2018.1460657>.

<sup>111</sup> Henry H. Calero, *The Power of Nonverbal Communication: How You Act is More Important Than What You Say* (Silver Lake Publishing, 2005).

“we are excessively sensitized to words and yet have very few terms for characterizing nonverbal behavior.”<sup>112</sup> As a result, authors turn towards very specific turns of phrase to describe characters to the reader, and orchestrate how they behave amongst each other. In both fiction and nonfiction, a successful writer is able to catapult the reader onto the page and experience a moment in the same way a character would.

By putting oneself in the perspective of a character unlike oneself, it is possible to analyze human behavior through their eyes, thus building one’s knowledge of different behavioral clues. More so than most other forms of media, high-quality fiction offers differing perspectives on societal behavior. Meeting new characters and experiencing how the author chooses to have them interact with each other is enlightening, and teaches human behavior, because even if it is fiction, it does not equate to falsehood. A fictional scenario can provide guidance for a similar event in real life, since it is easier to know how to react properly when an example has already been shown.

By engaging in behavioral learning, one can develop better ways of understanding and empathizing with people they do not know. It gets easier to put oneself in other people’s shoes when one has been placed in a hundred different situations that are unlike one’s day-to-day encounters. This way, it is easier to change one’s communication pattern. We, as people, often miss nuance, or add too much nuance to something; either reading far too little into something, or far too *much*. Analyzing how we communicate with each other is an important way to make a good impression, win trust, make friends, and change perceptions.

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<sup>112</sup> Mehrabian, *Silent Messages*.