



Nonverbal behaviour as driver of reciprocity in a hospitality encounter: A video elicitation study

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Nonverbal behaviour as driver of reciprocity in a hospitality encounter: A video elicitation study

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Abstract

To investigate the components of reciprocity in guest-employee dyadic nonverbal behaviour, we conducted four video-elicited focus group discussions with 12 hotel guests and 12 hotel employees. Through the six-step inductive thematic analysis, we identified three components in which the construction of reciprocity was manifested: mutual recognition, meaning exchange, and trust building. The study contributes to the extant literature by understanding reciprocity from the perspective of nonverbal cues exchange, and adds to the growing body of knowledge on consumer experience in hospitality management.

Keywords: Reciprocity, nonverbal behaviour, social psychology, consumer experience

Introduction, and background literature

Reciprocity is a norm of understanding that makes interaction possible to construct continuing relationships and meaningful exchanges between individuals (Smith, Mackie, & Claypool, 2014). In this vein, nonverbal interaction during face-to-face encounters could be theorized as reciprocity influencer, and thus it could impact emotion, wellbeing, and intimacy between individuals (Ekman, 2006). Reciprocity can establish positive emotion to reconcile initial strangeness, understand the value of relational goals, such as trust, and relationship between interactants, which could help co-construct eudaimonic and affective aspects of memorable experiences in guest-employee encounters (Chathoth, et al., 2016; Seligman, 2012).

Scholars suggested that hospitality employees must be efficient in both verbal and nonverbal interaction (Jung & Yoon, 2011). Unlike verbal interaction, nonverbal communication consists of subtle cues or gestures, which customers and service providers (e.g. hotel employees) mutually detect and decode. Like verbal cues, these signs can induce a change in attitude, belief, or behavior and shape individuals' mutual experiences (Burgoon, Buller, & Woodall, 1989; Moore et al., 2010). Thus, nonverbal cues emitted by the guest can contain important information for the employee to use for reciprocity, and vice versa.

Given the importance of reciprocity in hotels for the sake of memorable experiences for guests, the reciprocity potential of non-verbal communication in hospitality should be explored. The stream of nonverbal communication literature contends that particularly kinesic cues (i.e., facial expression and gestural approaches), have the higher potential to generate reciprocity in guest-employee dyads (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993; Schoenewolf, 1990). Birdwhistell (1952) systematized kinesics as eye contact, smiling, nodding, gestures,

and body orientation. Scholars tend to believe that kinesics can only lead to nonverbal communication because it mostly involves bodily actions or body movements during verbal communication (e.g., Sundaram & Webster, 2000; Gkorezis, Bellou, & Skemperis, 2015). The goal of the current research is to provide a nuanced understanding of if and how nonverbal behaviour fosters reciprocity in guest-employee dyads in hotels. Specifically, this study has two baseline research objectives focused on kinesics (i.e., eye contact, facial expression, nodding) : (1) to investigate the components of reciprocity in interpersonal relationship through hotel guests' and employees' kinesics and (2) to understand the process of kinesics-based reciprocity experience between guests employee in hotels.

Method

Methodologically, the study was underpinned by two Phases. In Phase I, covert non-participant observation was performed to develop and design stimuli video scenarios. According to a developed checklist of kinesics cues, as based on previous studies (e.g., Zaletel et al., 2012), the first author observed guest-employee interactions in lobbies of eight full-service hotels in Hong Kong. Based on these findings, hospitality and tourism graduate students were hired and trained to enact typical kinesics scenarios, which were video-recorded and later acted as video stimuli in Phase II (e.g., Lim et al., 2017). Three videos of guest-employee encounters were produced in total: (1) employee greets a guest at the front door, (2) interaction with a lobby greeter and (3) check-in.

In Phase II, four video-elicitation focus group discussions were conducted with hotel employees and guests. Each focus group consisted of 3 employee participants and 3 guest participants, recruited based on a purposeful sampling. Hotel employees had at least two years of frontline experience in a full-service hotel in Hong Kong, and guests stayed in a similar type of hotel the previous six months across the world. The researcher facilitated the focus groups in a way as to encourage the two groups (employees and guests) to discuss between each other to emulate the reciprocity principle, central to this research. Inductive six-step thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse data. All focus group discussions were video- recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Results and discussion

The depiction of reciprocity was present in both groups' (guest and employee) sentiments, such as self-induced experiences, beliefs, expectation and interpretation, and in the discussion about how hotel employees and hotel guests display reciprocity by means of kinesics. Specifically, we have identified three components in which this construction of reciprocity was manifested – (a) mutual recognition, (b) meaning exchange, and (c) trust building.

(a) Mutual recognition

Hotel guests tended to agree that reciprocity should begin with the sign of mutual recognition as embedded in their own as well as employees' body language. Mutual recognition is explicitly understood through two-sided confirmation that they witness their mutual expressions as approval of respective intention, such as guest desires their presence should be acknowledged, while the employee shows the similar sentiment from their service evaluation.

It's (...) show some approval for somebody else or some acknowledgement and they reciprocate you. He smiled, he makes eye contact with her nods and she reciprocates with a bigger smile. (Guest T)

She was feeling much better after she found her hotel (...) And because of her response, as she smiled, looked at me I felt quite positive and I also felt the recognition because I was feeling that I was one who made her feel better. (Employee D)

(b) Meaning exchange

The guest and the employee can mutually induce insights by interpreting each other's' body orientations and movement, and thus induced messages construct their mutual dependence. The display of nonverbal cues let the guest and the employee feel their individual on-going state of reaction. They form meanings based on character of cues exchange, which eventually leads them to transform their behaviour, whether to anticipate a state of relationship trustworthy to the subsequent phases of interaction.

Why would you have to check (look) it around? Because, when the guest kept checks it around, it seemed that the staff or the environment that made him feel not too good. (Guest D)

I noticed the body language about him that he was standing straight. He's alert. He's not tired. As the guest approached, he had a gentle smile on his face. So it also showed that he was enjoying his work. (Guest k)

(c) Trust building

Our findings indicated that how exchange of appropriate kinesics (i.e., signals of understanding, respect) guest-employee dyads dramatically contributed to changing their mind into concentrating mutual trust building. The findings showed that, trustworthiness is generally developed by a sense of fairness in the distribution of the kinesics that could maintain a mutual trust and respect. Hotel guest and employees also felt pleased to each other having exchange of warmth oriented cues, and symbolical reciprocation to each other. They further noted that trust building may begin from mutual understanding.

The process of reciprocity

Figure 1 demonstrates that across the eventual phases of reciprocity how an ordinary interaction moderated by acts of nonverbal cues in guest-employee dyads progress towards the touch point of relationship. We can observe that compared to unrecognized individuals in terms of encountering denial signals at the kinesic moment of 'the truth', recognized individuals encountering recognition-signals are highly motivated and have stronger, more fulfilling worth of meaningful meaning towards trust building, which in due course engages them to initiate relationship development. How acts of kinesics influence the perception of recognition help reciprocate experience for trust building and retain interpersonal relationships, for example, is reflected in the below statement:

I found that it was a good habit because in some hotels there was no welcome from the employee while she (employee) was sitting and did not face the guest. But this employee appeared to be smiling, being attentive and responding to the guest. So that was very, very good. (Guest D)

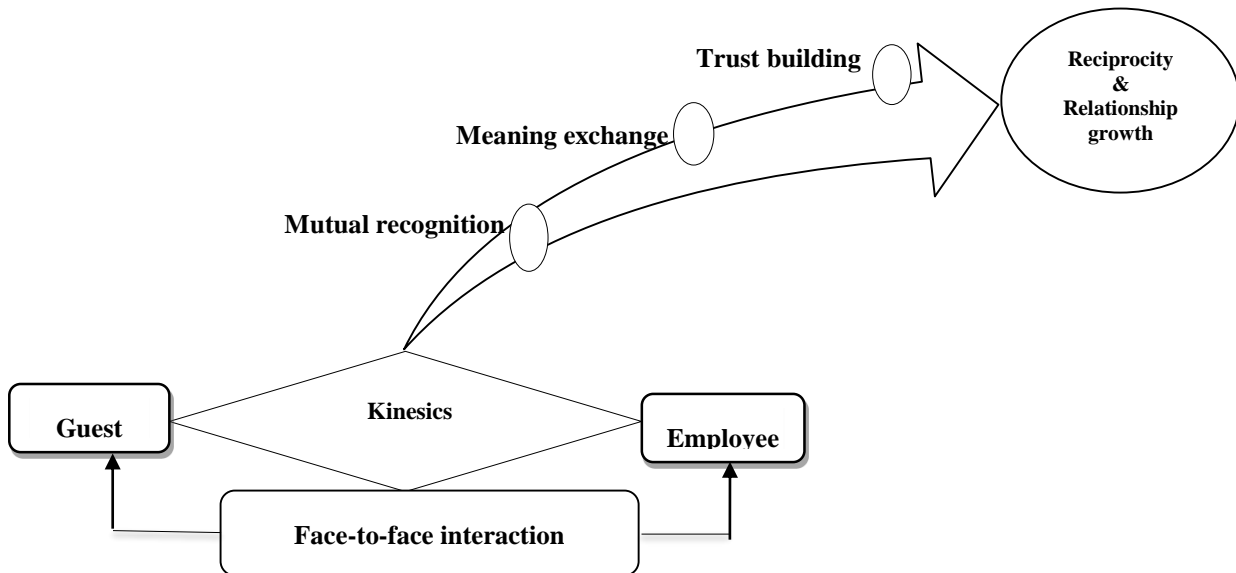


Figure 1. Reciprocity experience from nonverbal behaviour

Conclusion and implication

This working paper sheds light on our understandings of the psychological value of nonverbal interaction in hospitality. It seems conscious and unconscious acts of nonverbal behaviour in hospitality, and subsequently, experiences of nonverbal behaviour by guests and employees, who are likely to be unfamiliar with each other, represent the prototypical sociality and hospitality, resulting in a special kind of customer capital for both commercial and cognitive purpose. This study advocates that reciprocity may help grow and retain the customer and (employee) human capital, nursing self-efficacy between two unfamiliar individuals towards psychological engagement and relationship. It further highlights the rule of reciprocity can trigger feelings of recognition. Such an initial base of reciprocity and its eventual levels, such as trust building and relationship growth can be advanced upon acts of nonverbal behaviour exchange in hospitality situations. In practice, up to now, the guest experience in hotels was viewed from the standpoint of rather verbal communication during the moments of truth; understanding the role of non-verbal communication in consumer experience should help identify additional touchpoints to improve consumer experience and ultimately guest satisfaction.

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