First Impressions and the Reference Encounter: The Influence of Affect and Clothing on Librarian Approachability

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ABSTRACT

Whether or not a librarian appears approachable in public service environments is critical to providing excellent service, conveying a welcoming space, and encouraging library users to engage with one of the key intellectual venues on our campuses. This study used an image-rating method to assess the influence of affect and attire on patron impressions of librarian approachability. Findings suggest that librarian behaviors do matter, with specific treatments resulting in increased or decreased perceptions of approachability. These findings not only support common sense assessments that an attentive and welcoming environment is essential to encouraging patrons to engage with librarians; they also provide information on specific behaviors that affect approachability, allowing librarians to distinguish between a range of presentation styles that can be readily employed in public service.

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INTRODUCTION

Among the American Library Association's recommendations for the behavioral performance of information service providers, an essential component of a successful reference encounter is that a librarian be approachable (ALA, 2004). A judgment of approachability is a first impression, and has an enduring effect on the perceiver's experience (Fiske, Lin, & Neuberg, 1999). Whether or not a librarian appears approachable in public service environments is critical to providing excellent service, conveying a welcoming space, and encouraging library users to engage with one of the key intellectual venues on our campuses. Most empirical studies of reference interactions have focused on communications that take place after patrons have initiated contact with a librarian. The crucial moments in which a patron decides whether or not to approach a librarian to ask for help have the potential to influence, and even increase, our level of meaningful engagement with library users. This paper presents an image-rating study of librarian behaviors that can affect impressions of approachability prior to the reference transaction, and that can be applied at the reference desk and other points of service.

BACKGROUND

There is a wealth of library and information research that analyzes reference desk behaviors and patterns, and their effects on the

reference encounter (see Richardson, 2002 for a review of more than 150 studies). However, analyses tend to focus on questions of user satisfaction with reference service, the types of questions users ask librarians, the accuracy of information sharing during the reference interaction, or certain types of reference behaviors that are central to successful interactions. That is to say, these studies do not expressly focus on factors of approachability, and most of them examine users' interests and behaviors after patrons have initiated contact with a librarian.

Several studies have specifically focused on demographic trends that influence users' decisions to approach a librarian (Risner, 1990; Strickland & Bonnet, 2011; Bonnet & McAlexander, 2012). Such information is important to our understanding of the diverse experiences and expectations that users bring to our libraries, and provides insights into areas that need attention and outreach. However, these studies do little for the individual librarian who wishes to increase her/his own approachability.

A handful of observational studies have looked at behavioral trends that influence users' decisions to approach a librarian. Nonverbal behaviors in particular are essential to interpersonal communication and, consequently, to reference interactions, given that they are "irrepressibly impactful" (DePaulo, 1992). However, results of library studies that assessed behaviors and approachability have been mixed. Kazlauskas (1976) observed the body postures and facial expressions among staff at public service points in four academic libraries, assigning positive and negative characteristics of nonverbal communication to 148 interactions. The author concluded that librarians' positive nonverbal behavior (defined variably as eye contact, body posture and movement, and cheerfulness) yielded the same behavioral response from library users, also known as a contagion effect.

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Radford (1998) observed library users at two academic libraries, followed by 155 interviews of patrons after their engagement with staff at a reference desk. These interviews aimed to identify important characteristics that prompted a person's decision to approach a librarian. Interviewees reported that eye contact left the greatest impression on users, with nearly 24% commenting that it had a positive effect on their decision to approach the desk. Using a different experimental design, DeVore-Chew, Roberts, and Smith (1988) trained reference assistants in the use of certain nonverbal behaviors (facial expression, physical contact, and proximity to the patron) and observed 354 academic library users who approached the reference desk. They then distributed a questionnaire to these patrons that aimed to understand their perceptions of librarians and library facilities. Unlike the previous two studies, Devore-Chew et al. found no strong trend; specifically, positive nonverbal attributes did not demonstrate a statistically significant correlation to whom patrons chose to approach when asking for help at the reference desk.

These studies provide observational evidence of librarian behaviors that may affect patrons' decisions to approach the reference desk, with variable results that indicate a need for further study. In addition to the research mentioned above, Saxton (1997) used a quantitative approach to systematically examine variables associated with the ALA's guidelines for successful reference transactions, in order to predict factors that contribute to high levels of reference service in public libraries. These variables comprised librarian readiness, interest, understanding, and verification, and were combined into an aggregate factor of behavioral characteristics. These behaviors did affect three outcomes: transaction completeness, transaction usefulness, and patron satisfaction. However, given that readiness was one piece of an aggregate variable, it is unclear the influence of approachability *per se*, and questions remain as to the specific behaviors that make a librarian appear more approachable. Potter (2007) conducted exploratory research for her Master's thesis in which she incorporated behavioral and clothing treatments into a study specifically aimed at identifying factors of approachability among service providers in an academic library. The test data indicated that perceptions of librarian approachability were influenced by affect and clothing. However, the study only tested user perceptions of one librarian, so the observed trends potentially lack generalizability to the actual reference environment.

The above literature generally indicates that individual librarian behaviors can have an effect on patron perceptions of approachability. Largely missing from this body of research are controlled assessments for a wide range of librarians and patrons of specific factors that lead to user engagement with a librarian prior to the approach. The ALA guidelines provide valuable recommendations in the absence of much empirical data regarding librarian approachability, by advocating for behaviors that intuitively seem approachable (e.g., establish eye contact, smile, acknowledge patrons through the use of a friendly greeting) or by focusing on library position and movement (e.g., remain visible, be mobile, approach patrons). However, suggestions for ways that librarians can enhance their approachability would be bolstered by a deeper understanding of the factors that influence library users' perceptions of approachability.

To gain greater insight into behaviors that librarians can readily employ to increase their approachability, we conducted an image-rating study that systematically varied visible behaviors of hypothetical librarians. This study expands the research on approachability in libraries by focusing on two general categories of nonverbal communication: affect and clothing. For this image-rating study, we carefully balanced hypothetical librarian demographic characteristics (i.e., gender, age, and racial/ethnic affiliation), using a subset of previously rated images. We also tracked rater demographic characteristics. This design produced good experimental control of population and image variables that then facilitated the identification of specific behaviors that librarians can employ to increase their approachability.

APPROACHABILITY VARIABLES

The librarian behaviors tested in this study are described below, with accompanying hypotheses for their effects on librarian approachability.

Facial expression

The most studied behaviors in the scientific literature on approachability are those associated with facial expression. A happy or smiling facial expression has been demonstrated to increase the approachability of targets (Porter, Coltheart, & Langdon, 2007; Willis, Palermo, & Burke, 2011; Willis, Palermo, Burke, McGrillen, & Miller, 2010), with sincere smiles providing the greatest benefit (Miles, 2009). This may be related to smiling being associated with a positive affective state, as well as increased trait perceptions of trustworthiness (Oosterhof & Todorov, 2008), dominance, and affiliation (Montepare & Dobish, 2003). Smiling leads to a number of favorable outcomes in service settings, including positive assessments of the service provider and of service quality, as well as 'emotional contagion,' which refers to the client's embodiment of the service provider's affect (Pugh, 2001; Söderlund, 2008).

Women generally smile more often than men, with the magnitude of the difference between the sexes being affected by such factors as nationality, ethnicity, and age (LaFrance, Hecht, & Paluck, 2003). According to Hess, Adams, and Kleck (2004), this trend likely influences and is influenced by gender expectations for emotional expressivity. They found that these expectations, when controlling for facial appearance (i.e., when targets have the same androgynous face but have a gender-specific hair style), can lead to a contrast effect in which smiling men are actually perceived as happier than smiling women.

The above information creates a strong expectation that smiling will result in increased perceptions of approachability, versus a neutral expression. Based on the gender expectations for smiling, we hypothesize that the relative increase in approachability ratings from neutral expression to smiling will be greater for female targets than for male targets.

Direction of gaze

Direct eye contact with another person is a powerful social cue, allowing the perceiver to more quickly decode gaze-consistent emotions (e.g., "joyful" for direct eye contact and "sad" for averted eyes [Adams & Kleck, 2003]), and providing perceived approach-oriented emotion (e.g., anger versus fear [Adams & Kleck, 2005]). It follows that a librarian's averted direction of gaze should result in generally decreased approachability. What can be predicted with less certainty is whether the object of the librarian's attention, when not on the patron, influences the librarian's perceived approachability. Two principal, non-patron points of interest to which librarians often give attention at the reference desk are computers and books. It is feasible that each object may be associated with a different level of attention required of the librarian, which may affect her/his perceived approachability. A determining factor in this outcome may be age, as younger people are often considered to be more "natural" when viewing a computer, and vice versa for older populations. Another factor may be gender, given the prevalent stereotype that women are better at multitasking than men (Fasanya, McBride, Pope-Ford, & Ntuen, 2011; Buser & Peter, 2012; Ren, Zhou, & Fu, 2009).

For the direction of gaze variable, we predict (consistent with the ALA guidelines [ALA, 2004]) that averted eye contact will result in decreased approachability ratings for hypothetical librarians. We also predict that the object of librarian attention, either a computer or a book, will affect the magnitude of this decrease. Finally, we expect that this outcome will be influenced by the age and gender of the target.