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Behavioural effects of nonconscious mimicry and social intentions

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ABSTRACT

Nonconscious mimicry is a salient behaviour in many social interactions, such as the imitation of accent over the phone or the tendency to return a smile from another smiling person. However, existing research has yet to consider the importance of individuals' social intentions when entering into a social interaction in a customer service setting. This paper extends current managerial leadership theory into the novel setting of nonconscious mimicry to explain the critical role of social intentions in relationship building in customer service encounters. This research consists of a 3×2 between-subjects factorial design to evaluate the hypothesised relationships between nonconscious mimicry, social intentions, and product choice behaviour. The findings indicate that social intentions play a critical role influencing the relationship between nonconscious mimicry and product consumption, purchase intentions, and product liking in service encounters. Further, it is suggested that individuals identified as task-oriented should not be behaviourally imitated, as this will not positively increase product liking, purchase intentions, or product consumption. Instead, consumers should be primed to be relationship-oriented prior to nonconscious mimicry.

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1. Introduction

Prior research has given much attention to the role of nonconscious mimicry in establishing value-creating service experiences (van Baaren et al., 2004), but does this effect hold in all situations? Nonconscious mimicry, the human tendency to automatically copy the behaviour of others (Chartrand and Bargh, 1999), occurs in many social interactions within the business context. It is seen in the exchange of smiles between a customer and service provider at a retail store (Dimberg, Thunberg, & Elmehed, 2000) and in the imitation of accent over the phone (Giles and Powesland, 1975). This behaviour has many implications for relationship marketing, such as increasing the customer's liking of the service provider and improving product sales (Stel et al., 2010). However, existing research on the relationship between mimicry and its consequences has yet to consider a potential customer's intentions for the interaction or social exchange. The understanding of different types of social intentions (Zelazo, 1999), motives (Brandimonte et al., 2010), and communicative intentions (Carassa and Colombetti, 2014) have been well-documented and investigated in the psychology literature. However, nonconscious mimicry research to date has assumed all dyads adopt one or similar intentions when entering a social exchange. This paper rejects this assumption that individuals'

interactions in social exchanges are driven by similar intentions. In particular, the differences in intentions within social interactions are considered when investigating nonconscious mimicry. This research also assumes that service encounters are a form of social interaction and social exchange. Consequently, the role of intentions on nonconscious mimicry and the resulting product choice behaviour is investigated.

The purpose of this research is threefold. First, key benefits of nonconscious mimicry for relational service firms are examined, including the effects that it has on product liking, purchase intentions, and consumption. Second, nonconscious mimicry is explicated through a new holistic framework. This explication is required to summarise the multiple existing components of nonconscious mimicry for the development of future priorities (MacInnes, 2011). Whilst the literature has established that there are multiple moderators influencing the impact of nonconscious mimicry, there is one particular construct – social intentions – that has not been given significant consideration in this area. This leads to the third purpose: developing social intentions as a novel moderator in the relationship between non-conscious mimicry and beneficial outcomes for the firm in order to show that individuals are not driven by the same intentions when entering a social interaction. This should then give firms guidance on when non-conscious mimicry is appropriate or not.

1.1. Literature review

Nonconscious mimicry is the automatic tendency to copy the verbal, facial, emotional, or behavioural characteristics of others

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(Kavanagh et al., 2011). The role of nonconscious mimicry is salient in many service encounters. Nonconscious mimicry can be identified as verbal and non-verbal mimicry.

Verbal mimicry includes accents (Giles and Powesland, 1975), speech rate (Cappela and Planalp, 1981), syntax (Levelt and Kelter, 1982), and latency to speak (Platek et al., 2003). Notable research reveals that the mimicry of consumers' speech influences concrete behavioural outcomes, including increased charitable donations (Kulesza et al., 2014a), generosity (van Baaren et al., 2003), and relationship outcomes, such as interpersonal liking and persuasion (Tanner and Chartrand, 2008a).

Non-verbal mimicry includes the mimicry of facial expressions (Chartrand and Bargh, 1999; Dimberg et al., 2000), physiological states (Hatfield et al., 1994), and behaviours such as body posture, gestures or physical movements (Chartrand and Lakin, 2013). In particular, the mimicry of psychological states explains the importance of non-verbal communication and heavily supports the notion of emotional contagion (Friedman and Riggio, 1981; Neumann and Strack, 2000). In general, non-verbal mimicry serves as a critical function for establishing interpersonal belonging in social interactions (La France and Broadbent, 1976). Existing literature illustrates that the mimicry of consumers' non-verbal behaviour results in similar findings as the outcomes of verbal mimicry, such as improved prosociality (van Baaren et al., 2004) and persuasion (Bailenson and Yee, 2005).

Nonconscious mimicry is common in human interactions and easy to objectively identify, such as the imitation of foot shaking (Chartrand and Bargh, 1999; Chartrand and Lakin, 2013; Schefflen, 1964). More specifically, nonconscious mimicry is evident in interpersonal service encounters where service providers imitate customers' rate of speech, their arm gestures whilst standing and foot strides whilst walking around a store. Given the importance of employee–customer interactions in most service related industries, nonconscious mimicry, including verbal and non-verbal mimicry, will be explored in this paper.

1.1.1. Basic components of mimicry

Although there are key disparities between the definitions of nonconscious mimicry, such as mimicry as the imitation of behaviour between dyads and groups (Kulesza et al., 2014b), and the imitation of behaviour within physical and virtual space (Bailenson and Yee, 2005), there is general consistency in the operationalisation of nonconscious mimicry. By considering all conceptual and operational definitions from previous studies, we assert that nonconscious mimicry is the automatic tendency to copy the verbal, facial, emotional, or behavioural characteristics of others (Kavanagh et al., 2011), given that the following elements are present: (1) people – at least one mimicker (the mimicking party) and one receiver (the receiving party) (Johnston, 2002); (2) a simultaneous interaction between parties (Kulesza et al., 2014b); (3) an opportunity and time for a mimicking interaction to occur (Tanner et al., 2008b); (4) and undetection (Ashton-James et al., 2007). Undetection is an important caveat of this area as it defines the interaction as nonconscious. This imitation must not be detected by the receiving partner; otherwise, the interaction will be perceived as strange, which nullifies the effects of nonconscious mimicry (Ashton-James et al., 2007). The time required for a mimicker to copy a particular action or behaviour of the receiver is within three to five seconds (from each action) (Chartrand and Lakin, 2013).

1.1.2. Nonconscious mimicry and the theoretical evolution

Chartrand and Bargh (1999) suggested that the mere perception of another person's behaviour increases the likelihood of engaging in the same behaviour. This perception–behaviour link is used to explain the presence of behavioural mimicry occurring between strangers, where individuals alter their behaviour to blend

into social environments (Chartrand and Bargh, 1999). Since nonconscious mimicry can transpire without any intentions or awareness of its occurrence (Schefflen, 1964), individuals may not become aware of the act of mimicking or being mimicked (Chartrand and Bargh, 1999).

Further to the perception–behaviour link, Lakin and Chartrand (2003) assert that the mimicry–liking link, the act of mimicking that enhances liking for the mimicker, is an automatic human tendency that generates rapport and affiliation with others. This particular perspective, that mimicry is not simply an automatic occurrence from mere observation but also promotes interpersonal liking, is adopted in this research to explain the outcomes of nonconscious mimicry.

1.1.3. Nonconscious mimicry and established moderators

Multiple studies have explored the interaction of external factors influencing the effects of mimicry and its boundary conditions (Chartrand and Lakin, 2013). These moderators can be organised into two categories: mimicking party (mimicker) or receiving party (receiver). This dichotomous categorisation suggests that the moderators can be derived from or attributed to either the mimicking or receiving party.

From the role as a mimicker, existing research has established likeability and transparency of need as two key factors that moderate nonconscious mimicry. Studies (Kavanagh et al., 2011; Stel et al., 2010) strongly illustrate that people are more likely to mimic a likeable interaction partner than a dislikeable interaction partner. Additionally, an explicit statement regarding one's investment and the transparent need for help from someone else positively influences the receiver's preferences and evaluations of the mimicking individual (Tanner et al., 2008b).

The person being mimicked also heavily influences this social interaction. Factors that affect the mimicked party's impact of nonconscious mimicry include cognitive load (Sweller, 1988), mood (Isen, 1984), and self-construal (Ashton-James et al., 2007). According to Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory (1988), the receiving party must have the cognitive working capacity to nonconsciously receive environmental social cues and mimicry from the mimicking partner. As working memory load increases, the attention to surrounding environmental cues becomes inhibited (van Leeuwen et al., 2009). Consequently, the receiving party requires some level of working memory capacity to allow for responsiveness to mimicry, and therefore enable the effects of mimicry to be revealed (van Leeuwen et al., 2009). For example, a preoccupied customer is less likely to be influenced by being mimicked. Mood has a significant influence on receptiveness to information (Isen, 1984) to an extent that the mood of a receiver substantially influences the frequency and outcomes of nonconscious mimicry (van Baaren et al., 2006). For example, the positive mood of the mimicked party is likely to make them more open to receiving (albeit subconsciously) socially oriented information. This is also likely to positively influence consumer attitudes and consumption behaviour (Gardner, 1985). It has also been suggested that individuals with an interdependent self-construal display a preference for interpersonal closeness and regularly adopt prosocial orientations as well as nonconscious mimicry (Ashton-James et al., 2007).

1.1.4. Social intentions as a moderator

Despite comprehensive literature documenting the differences in people's motives (Zelazo, 1999) and communicative intentions (Carassa and Colombetti, 2014), the nonconscious mimicry literature has not particularly emphasised the importance of social intentions. Given that many actions are performed with motivation (Carassa and Colombetti, 2014), social intention is pervasive and plays a crucial role in social interactions. Social intention is the motive or goal that explains an individual's drive to enter a social

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