



## The depicted service employee in marketing communications: An empirical assessment of the impact of facial happiness



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### ABSTRACT

Employees are often depicted in service firms' marketing communications material. This study examines one particular aspect of such depictions: the signaling of happiness in terms of the employees' facial expressions. It is assumed that depicted faces transmit emotional signals, that receivers are hardwired to react to such signals, and that the emotional signals influence the outcomes of the receivers' information processing activities. Our empirical results show that this was indeed the case: employee display of happiness was positively and significantly associated with employee evaluations. The contribution of employee happiness remained significant when other characteristics of the depicted face (e.g., attractiveness) were controlled for. Our results also show that employee evaluations had a positive impact on the overall evaluation of the offer of the employee's firm, and that the employee evaluations mediated the association between employee display of happiness and the evaluation of the offer.

### 1. Introduction

Service firms often use pictures of their employees in marketing communications activities (Tripp, 1997). Indeed, in a service context, several scholars recommend portrayals of employees, because this is likely to make a service offer more tangible and thereby easier to evaluate for customers who are in the pre-purchase phase of the decision making process (Hill and Gandhi, 1992; Mittal, 1999). Such portrayals of employees should be seen in the light of a broader trend in which marketing communications activities are becoming increasingly imaged-based, and images depicting humans are particularly prevalent (McQuarrie, 2007; Pollay, 1985). Prior advertising research has shown that several characteristics of depicted persons (e.g., physical attractiveness and ethnic origin) affect receivers' reactions to the ad and the advertised product (Baker and Churchill, 1977; Petroschius and Crocker, 1989), so the characteristics of depicted persons do have marketing implications.

In the present study we examine one particular aspect of depicted employees, namely the impact of their faces' emotional content. Our main assumptions are that (a) human faces transmit emotional signals, (b) receivers are hardwired to assess the emotional signals stemming from others' faces, and (c) such signals influence outcomes of the receivers' information processing activities. We focus on one particular emotional state of the depicted person, happiness, because happy facial expressions are ubiquitous in a marketing communications context. The

purpose of our study is to examine if happiness expressed by depicted service employee faces influences receiver reactions, namely evaluations of the employee and evaluations of the offer from the firm in which the employee works.

This examination is intended to offer contributions to several fields. Previous service research has examined the impact of employees' display of emotions on customer reactions in the context of service encounters (e.g., Andrzejewski and Mooney, 2016; Barger and Grandey, 2006; Gabriel et al., 2015; Otterbring, 2017; Pugh, 2001; Söderlund and Rosengren, 2004; Söderlund and Rosengren, 2010; Ustrov et al., 2016), and the present study's focus on employees' display of emotions in marketing materials is intended to broaden the scope of the existing research so that it includes the potential for an impact of the employee's facial expressions also before the customer shows up for a service encounter. Moreover, the impact of the depicted employee has been acknowledged in some previous studies. So far, however, existing attempts to assess specific characteristics of employees used in pictorial material in a service context and their impact on receivers have dealt with only a few employee characteristics, for example, employee gender (Lin et al., 2008; Stafford, 1998) and whether the employee is a manager or not (Stafford, 1998).

As for specific contributions in emotional terms, it should be noted that emotions are often dealt with in amalgamated terms in the marketing literature (i.e., many discrete emotions are lumped together in broad categories such as "positive emotions" or "positive affect"). Yet

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several authors have argued that discrete emotions with the same valence may differ in their antecedents, autonomic physiology, central nervous system physiology, evolutionary history, and in their effects on judgment and choice (Ekman, 1993; Lerner et al., 2015; Söderlund and Rosengren, 2004), so our focus on one specific and discrete emotion, happiness, is an attempt to respond to the call for a disaggregated approach in academic research on emotions.

Moreover, existing attempts to assess the impact of a happy human face on receivers' reactions have mainly been based on smiles, which are typically operationalized in dichotomous terms (Berg et al., 2015; Kulczynski et al., 2016; Magnini et al., 2013; Nelson et al., 1988, 1988; Otterbring, 2017) or in terms of smile levels (Gabriel et al., 2015; Ustrov et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2015). Similarly, the typical study of the impact of facial expressions outside a marketing context conceptualizes facial expressions in categorical terms. For example, one particular face is either happy, angry, or sad (e.g., Critchley et al., 2000). However, if a depicted person smiles rather than does not smile, shows a small or a big smile, or if a person's facial expression is happy as opposed to angry or sad, we argue, represent relatively primitive indicators of happiness levels, so in the present study we make an attempt to assess depicted employees' happiness with continuous measures – both with data from rating scales used by participants and psychophysiological data. The second type of data (we used the software FaceReader to assess the emotional content in depicted employees' faces) represents an approach hitherto not used in existing studies. Indeed, the presence of both rating scales data and psychophysiological data in our study allows us to compare these two types of data, and we discuss several outcomes of such comparisons.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Faces and expressions of happiness

Our point of departure is that faces are inherently interesting and attention-grabbing (Palermo and Rhodes, 2007), and that we humans are evolutionarily hardwired to assess them in several dimensions (Garrido et al., 2016). One particularly important dimension is emotional states, because our ability to correctly attribute the emotions of others is a crucial component of successful social interaction (Harker and Keltner, 2001). It is therefore not surprising that discrete brain areas are associated with the processing of specific facial expressions (Critchley et al., 2000), and that the processes used for attributing different emotional states to different facial expressions are extremely fast and efficient (Batty and Taylor, 2003; Ekman, 1992). Indeed, even subliminal exposure to another person's facial expression has been shown to have an impact on the receiver's behavior (Winkielman et al., 2005).

We humans seem to be particularly well-equipped to assess the level of happiness in a face, in the sense that this expression is recognized very rapidly (Batty and Taylor, 2003; Simpson and Crandall, 1972), it produces a high level of agreement among observers who are asked to provide judgments about target persons (Borkenau and Liebler, 1992), and it is connected to target person happiness with a higher rate than the rate with which other facial expressions are connected to other emotional states (Ebner et al., 2010; Langner et al., 2010; Wallbott, 1991). Given exposure to a person with a visible face, it is therefore expected that the receiver makes a happiness assessment with regards to the person – and we expect that this assessment has implications for evaluations of the person. Moreover, in a situation in which the person is a representative of a firm, we expect that the evaluation of the person would influence evaluations of the firm's offer.

### 2.2. A depicted employee's level of happiness and evaluations of the employee

Given exposure to a person with a visible face, and a happiness

assessment of this person, the person's happiness can influence the receiver's evaluation of the person in several ways. First, the positive charge of a person's happiness can have an impact on assessments of other attributes of the person. This is sometimes referred to as a halo effect; the perceptions of one attribute is influenced by information about another attribute (Forgas, 2011). Previous studies indicate that persons with happy facial expressions (such as smiles) are believed to have more positive characteristics (e.g., being friendly, assuring, good-natured, intelligent, sincere, sociable, and agreeable) than persons with non-happy facial expressions (Hack, 2014; Knutson, 1996; Magnini et al., 2013; Nelson et al., 1988; Otta et al., 1994; Otta et al., 1994, 1996; Reis et al., 1990; Turner and Hunt, 2014). Then, in the next step, we assume that the combined bundle of positive attributes are integrated in the receiver's mind (Anderson, 1971) and have a positive impact on overall evaluations of the person.

Second, receivers perceive happy persons as opposed to non-happy persons as more similar to themselves (Garrido et al., 2016). One reason may be that of all emotions people experience in everyday life, happiness is the most frequent (Wilhelm et al., 2004). Similarly, in diary-based studies, people typically report higher levels of positive affect than negative affect (Vittengl and Holt, 1998). In fact, most people report being happy most of the time (Taylor and Brown, 1988), and this aspect can boost similarity perceptions when we are exposed to another happy person. And in person perception studies, there is strong empirical support for a similarity-liking link (Cialdini, 2001). Given that a happy face is a powerful signal of social acceptance (Critchley et al., 2000), liking for persons with such facial expressions can also be boosted by associations to inclusion and belongingness, which represent positively charged states for most individuals.

Third, the receiver's own emotions can be influenced by perceptions of the target person's emotions, because emotions are contagious in social settings (Hatfield et al., 1993; Howard and Gengler, 2001; Neumann and Strack, 2000; Pugh, 2001). Indeed, mere exposure to a photo of a stranger is enough to induce emotions in the receiver – emotions that are congruent with the emotions displayed by the stranger. This type of emotional contagion seems particularly likely with respect to happiness (Dimberg and Thunberg, 1998; Harker and Keltner, 2001; Lau, 1982). It is thus expected that there is a positive association between the happiness expressed by a target person's face and the receiver's own happiness. Results supporting this are reported by Kulczynski et al. (2016); they found that an ad comprising a picture of celebrity induced higher receiver positive affect when the celebrity was smiling as opposed to not smiling. In the next step in the receiver's information processing activities, it is expected that the receiver's own happiness has a positive impact on his or her overall evaluations of a target person. This is consonant with an affect infusion mechanism (Forgas, 1995), and this influence of own emotions on evaluations is particularly likely when there is little time or little detailed information available for substantive processing (i.e., conditions under which much marketing content is processed).

Several possible routes of influence are thus suggesting that persons perceived to be happy are evaluated more positively. This is consonant with indirect evidence regarding behavioral outcomes. For example, perceivers approach persons displaying positive emotions more often than those displaying negative emotions (Rennels and Kayl, 2015). Similarly, a smiling facial expression of a depicted person has been shown to encourage appointments with the person more than when the person is not smiling (Nelson et al., 1988). The following, then, is hypothesized when a receiver is exposed to a photo of a service firm employee:

**H1.** The depicted employee's happiness is positively associated with the receiver's overall evaluation of the employee

### 2.3. Person evaluations and evaluations of the firm's offer

Many service-related studies dealing with face-to-face encounters

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