



## Reports

## The pantomime of persuasion: Fit between nonverbal communication and influence strategies

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## ABSTRACT

How can we be more successful in persuading others and increase the odds of behavioral compliance? We argue that when a verbal influence strategy is embedded in a nonverbal style that fits its orientation, this boosts the strategy's effectiveness, whereas a misfit attenuates its impact. In field-experiment 1, agents tried to persuade participants in buying a candybox by using an approach-oriented strategy (Door-In-The-Face, DITF). An eager nonverbal style increased the impact of the DITF, whereas vigilant nonverbal cues rendered it ineffective. Conversely, field-experiment 2 showed that an avoidance-oriented strategy (Disrupt-Then-Reframe) benefited from being presented in a vigilant, rather than an eager nonverbal style, which similarly attenuated its impact. Hence, eager nonverbal cues promote the effectiveness of approach-oriented influence strategies whereas vigilant cues do the opposite and increase the impact of avoidance-oriented influence strategies.

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We are all frequently approached and sometimes harassed by volunteers, fundraisers, and sales-representatives attempting to get us to say “yes” to their offer. These agents have at their disposal a wide variety of influence strategies aimed at increasing the odds of compliance. Studies have focused on what agents have to say to foster persuasion, but have largely ignored the interplay with nonverbal communication in this process (e.g., Burger, 1999; McFarland, Challagalla, & Shervani, 2006). Furthermore, the influence of fit (and misfit) between nonverbal communication and influence strategies on the recipient's compliance has not yet received empirical investigation. The present research aims to fill this void by examining the impact of influence strategies when embedded in nonverbal behavior that either fits or misfits the key orientation of the strategy. We propose that nonverbal communication can “boost” the persuasive impact of influence strategies to the extent that it fits the strategy's orientation, and conversely, that a misfit between nonverbal behavior and type of strategy may render it ineffective in fostering compliance.

Previous research on social influence has focused primarily on identifying and testing verbalized scripts that agents may use to induce compliance and persuasion on the part of the recipient (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). For instance, research on personal selling has identified a host of persuasive techniques that sales representatives use to convince prospective buyers, such as information exchange, the use of recommendations, requests, promises, or ingratiation (McFarland et al., 2006). In addition, studies have focused

on several well-defined influence techniques employing heuristic decision making to induce compliance. Well-known examples include the “Door-In-The-Face” technique (DITF; Cialdini et al., 1975), in which the target request is presented as a concession to an unreasonably large initial request, and the “Disrupt-Then-Reframe” technique (DTR; Davis & Knowles, 1999; Fennis, Das, & Pruyn, 2004, 2006; Kardes, Fennis, Hirt, Tormala, & Bullington, 2007), where an otherwise conventional sales script is interrupted by a subtle, odd element (i.e., the “disruption”, for example stating the price of an offer in pennies before stating it in dollars) followed by a persuasive phrase that concludes the script (i.e., the “reframe”, e.g., “it's a bargain!”).

Interestingly, Knowles and Linn (2004) have recently argued that the DITF and DTR might operate differently because they rely on different orientations. More specifically, these authors have proposed that some influence strategies may work because they increase an approach orientation, while others are effective because they mobilize an avoidance orientation. More specifically, what they term “alpha strategies” persuade people by activating approach forces, increasing people's motivation toward a goal by making the offer or request more attractive. Hence, these strategies persuade by adding an extra incentive for compliance. For example, offering a discount to a product qualifies as an alpha strategy because it provides an extra reason to buy the product. Likewise, one can engage the norm of reciprocity (i.e., granting a small favor or concession that prompts recipients to reciprocate and return the favor) as an addition to the approach forces promoting compliance (Knowles & Linn, 2004). As demonstrated by Cialdini et al. (1975), the DITF hinges on the principle of reciprocity (see also Fennis, Janssen, & Vohs, 2009; Gouldner, 1960): a large request by the agent is typically declined

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after which the agent presents the smaller request as a clear concession, thus provoking a counter-concession on the part of the recipient (i.e., compliance). Hence, the DITF works because of the addition of an interpersonal obligation to the reasons for compliance (Knowles, Butler, & Linn, 2001).

“Omega strategies”, on the other hand, attempt to persuade people by minimizing avoidance forces, reducing people's motivation to move away from a goal. One way of minimizing avoidance forces is to reduce or distract resistance to persuasion. For example, in a classic study, Festinger and Maccoby (1964) presented participants with a comedy to distract them from a counterattitudinal persuasive message. Similarly, one can directly disrupt the extent of recipient counterargumentation to resist a persuasion attempt (Knowles & Linn, 2004). As shown by Fennis et al. (2004), this process underlies the impact of the DTR technique. More specifically, this research showed that the disruption interfered with the target's counterargumentation in response to the persuasion attempt, thus increasing the persuasive impact of the reframe.

There is reason to assume that nonverbal communication may play a role of significance in these settings – by itself and in interplay with these verbal influence strategies. For instance, a study of McGinley, LeFevre, and McGinley (1975) showed that agents with open body positions were evaluated more positively and were more persuasive than agents with closed body positions. In addition, Cesario and Higgins (2008) investigated the influence of fit between the recipient's orientation and the influence agent's nonverbal style. They distinguished between an eager and a vigilant nonverbal style. An eager nonverbal style is approach-oriented and involves animated, broad opening movements, hand movements openly projected outward, forward-leaning body positions, fast body movements, and fast speech rate. A vigilant nonverbal style is avoidance-oriented and involves gestures showing precision, motions that represent slowing down, backward-leaning positions, slower body movements, and slower speech (Cesario & Higgins, 2008). They showed that when recipients in a promotion focus – who perceive goals as hopes and aspirations and prefer eager, advancement strategies (Higgins, 1998) – viewed a message delivered in an eager nonverbal style, they developed more positive attitudes and also behaved more in accordance with the recommendation than when there was a misfit between nonverbal style and regulatory orientation. Likewise, when recipients in a prevention focus – who perceive goals as duties and obligations and prefer vigilant, cautious strategies (Higgins, 1998) – viewed a message delivered in a vigilant nonverbal style, they too showed more persuasion and advocacy congruent behavior. The experience of regulatory fit underlies these effects, such that a fit between the recipient's focus and the orientation indicated by the nonverbal style can augment persuasion and compliance, whereas a misfit can do the opposite and decrease persuasion and compliance (Cesario & Higgins, 2008).

Importantly, the experience of fit can arise from the interplay between message characteristics and recipient's orientation or it may reside in different features of the persuasive appeal itself (see for example Evans & Petty, 2003; Koenig, Cesario, Molden, Kosloff, & Higgins, 2009). Hence, we extend previous research by examining the impact of fit and misfit within one and the same persuasive appeal and assess the effectiveness of (mis)fit of the type of verbal influence strategy and nonverbal style on recipient's behavioral compliance with a sales request. More specifically, we argue that the impact of alpha (approach) and omega (avoidance) influence strategies will be moderated by the type of nonverbal style. We propose that the effectiveness of these influence strategies will be boosted in situations of fit and attenuated in situations of misfit with the type of nonverbal style. Hence, alpha influence strategies will receive a boost when they are delivered in an eager non-verbal style. Similarly, the impact of omega influence strategies will be increased when delivered in a vigilant nonverbal style. In contrast, the impact of alpha (omega)

strategies will be reduced when delivered in a vigilant (eager) nonverbal style.

The effect of fit between influence strategy and the agent's nonverbal behavior style is investigated in two field studies where we solicited compliance with a purchase request. In Study 1, we examined whether the impact of an approach-oriented influence strategy, a Door-In-The-Face technique, would benefit when an influence agent exhibits an eager as opposed to vigilant nonverbal style. We expected the impact of the DITF technique on compliance to be more pronounced when delivered in an eager, rather than vigilant nonverbal style. In Study 2, we examined whether the impact of an avoidance-oriented influence strategy, a Disrupt-Then-Reframe technique, would benefit when an influence agent exhibits a vigilant as opposed to eager nonverbal style. We expected the impact of the DTR technique on compliance to be more pronounced when delivered in a vigilant, rather than eager nonverbal style.

## Experiment 1

### Method

#### Participants and design

The present field-experiment employed a 2 (nonverbal style: eager vs. vigilant)  $\times$  2 (influence strategy: Door-In-The-Face (DITF) vs. target request-only) between participants design. In a commercial-selling context, a total of 99 consumers (20 male and 79 female; mean age 51.6 years,  $SD = 16.6$  years) participated in the experiment. In this and the next experiment, participant gender did not show any main or interaction effect (all coefficients  $< .1$ ) and hence, is not discussed further.

#### Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to conditions. In a supermarket in an urbanized area, consumers were approached by one of four confederates (2 male and 2 female), blind to experimental hypotheses, acting as sales representatives. They tried to persuade shoppers to buy a box of (Christmas) candy. Each of the confederates exhibited either eager or vigilant nonverbal behavior during his/her interaction with the consumer (cf. Cesario & Higgins, 2008). In the eager style, the confederate used active, open gesticulation with hands projecting outward. In addition he/she actively leaned forward to the participant, and displayed fast body movement and fast speech rate. The vigilant nonverbal style, in contrast, involved a behavior pattern where the confederate used more passive gesticulation, keeping his/her hands close to the body. In addition, he/she leaned slightly backward and displayed slower body movement and speech rate.

In addition, participants were either exposed to a Door-In-The-Face (DITF) influence strategy or a target-request only control script. The DITF technique involved preceding the target request with an unreasonably large initial request (Cialdini et al., 1975). Hence, in the DITF condition, the confederate stated: “Good afternoon sir/madam, Christmas is rapidly approaching, and so these boxes of Christmas candy are on special offer today! I may offer you six boxes of candy for six Euros” The confederate then waited until the target responded (almost always by rejecting the offer) and continued: “You feel that six boxes is a bit too much? Ok, I understand. In that case I may also offer you one box for the price of 99 Eurocents!” In the target-request only condition, the consumer was only presented with the final sales request: “Good afternoon sir/madam, Christmas is rapidly approaching, and so these boxes of Christmas candy are on special offer today! I may offer you one box for the price of 99 Eurocents!” The sales representative waited until the consumer responded to his/her offer. The purchase of any number of boxes of candy served as a measure of compliance with the sales request.

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