



# The relationship between non-verbal communication cues and student satisfaction

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### ABSTRACT

Students' satisfaction has become an essence of success in today's highly competitive world. In service industry specifically the education industry, communication is vital to determine students' satisfaction. Past researches indicated that, most meaning of conversational messages comes from non-verbal communication. Therefore, this study intended to examine the relationship of non-verbal communication cues to students' satisfaction. A total of 300 respondents were sampled from all around UiTM Kedah. They were evaluated on their perception on lecturers' non-verbal communication behavior that would lead to their satisfaction to the services provided. The results of the study illustrate that three of the non-verbal communication cues were significant and positively related to students' satisfaction. Kinesics and paralanguage was rated as among the non-verbal communication cues that provided the most impact on students' satisfaction. However the result also indicated that there was no significant relationship between physical appearances of the lecturers to the students' satisfaction. Overall, students' in UiTM Kedah are fairly satisfied with the non-verbal communication cues of the lecturers. The present study caters for a wide spectrum of students and development professionals, especially those who are interested in non-verbal communication related issues. It is highly hoped that the information gleaned from the present study may assist all service employees specifically in understanding better, the importance of non-verbal communication and its effects on students' satisfaction..

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### Introduction

By having an excellent communication system, students who are the customers of an education organization, will be satisfied with what they have received while dealing with the organization. Customer need to be satisfied in every single way, namely the quality of product and the service they obtain executing transaction with the organization. Customer satisfaction is determined by the overall feeling or attitude a person has about a product or service after it has been purchased or experienced. In addition, customers are engaged in a constant process of evaluating the things or services they obtain (Fournier & Mick, 1999).

In the education industry specifically, communication is vital to determine the satisfaction of the customers who are mainly the students and this will lead to the success or failure of an organization. But organization should be aware that communication is not only verbally but much more beyond that. Studies have been carried out and it was concluded that 65% of the meaning of conversational messages comes from non-verbal cues, leaving only 35% to verbal communication (Philpot, 1983). Thus, such information will provide the basis for improvement in communication skills and contribute to make difference.

### Problem statement

Although the verbal communication in service industry and its effects on customer satisfaction has been investigated widely, the nonverbal aspects and its effects on customer satisfaction in service industry mainly education remained virtually unexplored in the marketing literature. The services characterized by considerable interpersonal contact are likely to benefit greatly

from an investigation of the role of nonverbal communication on students' evaluations of service experiences. But not much research has been done on lecturers' nonverbal behavior despite its importance to customer satisfaction.

In Malaysian context specifically, no research has been done to identify the relationship of non-verbal communication and its effect on customer satisfaction. In addition, gender differences have been explored in the West and how both genders perceive differently on the non-verbal communication of service employees has been identified. But, no research was done in the Malaysian context. Thus, with this in mind it is vital to explore the importance of service employees' who are the lecturers in the context of this study nonverbal communication behavior during service interactions to provide better satisfaction to the students especially in the Malaysian context.

### Research objective

1. To identify whether there is a relationship between each of the non-verbal communication cues and student satisfaction.
2. To identify which non-verbal communication cues is the most dominant to student satisfaction.

### Significance of the study

The present study is an applied research carries out with the intention of applying the result of its finding to determine the factors that are related to student satisfaction currently being experienced in service firms, mainly is the education industry. This present study is significant in providing valuable insights in terms of theoretical and managerial implication for the benefits of the education industry as well as offering useful guidance for the future study in similar service industry topic. From the literature point, the present study will examine on the

relationship between non-verbal communication cues and student satisfaction to support the results of past marketing literature. In the Malaysian context, we could hardly find scientific studies that examined the non-verbal communication of lecturers. Thus, the present study and its findings will be the basis for future research.

### Scope of the study

The organization being studied covers Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) in Kedah. The individual being studied are lecturers of this university. The students are those who have experience studying in UiTM in Kedah. They are from various demographic characteristics such as ages, genders, education background and family background. The topic being studied in the present study is the students' satisfaction on non-verbal communication behaviors provided by the lecturers of UiTM Kedah.

### Literature review

#### Customer satisfaction in service encounters

The significance of maintaining current customers and attracting new ones is of great importance in marketing. Literature demonstrates that equal importance should be placed on maintaining current customers as well as "recruiting" new ones. An important element for keeping current customers is to demonstrate true commitment when a service failure occurs (McCole, 2004).

It is commonly known that employees' display of affective characteristics, such as friendliness, responsiveness, and enthusiasm, positively influences customers' overall evaluation of service consumption experiences and perceptions of service quality. Further, we are aware that employees' verbal behavior during an encounter (such as words of greeting and courtesy) affect customer perceptions of employee friendliness and consequently enhance the perceived quality of the service interaction (Elizur, 1987).

#### Non-verbal communication

A non-verbal communication is one that communicates without word. Non-verbal messages are an important part of the communication process because they provide added information the receiver can use in interpreting what is said. The extra information can add to or detract from the meaning of a message (Krizan et al., 2005).

Non-verbal communication is composed of the messages we send without or in addition to words. These messages have a strong impact on us as receivers. Often, action speaks so loudly that they drown out spoken words. This happens because we use non-verbal communication symbols as a means to determine what sender really feels and the degree of importance the sender attach to the message and to us (Means, 2004).

Means (2004) also said that spoken or written symbols make up of verbal part of a message and are accompanied by non-verbal symbols. However, a non-verbal message may not have a verbal counterpart. Nonverbal symbols which include body language, appearance, touch, space, time and voice exist in written and oral communication as well as in the environment. Research indicates that when verbal and non-verbal symbols conflict, the receiver usually believes the non-verbal messages.

#### Kinesics

The first communication cue is kinesics that measures the body movement is a vital cue in a non-verbal communication. Although each body movement probably does not have its own unique meaning, several body movements tend to convey similar meaning. For instance, research suggests that the cues of casual

smiling, light laughter, forward body lean, open body posture, and frequent eye contact are perceived as conveying intimacy and non-dominance – the characteristics commonly associated with friendliness and courtesy. On the other hand, kinesics such as stoic facial expressions, either staring or avoiding eye contact, backward lean of body, and closed body posture are perceived as conveying dominance, unfriendliness, and emotional distance (Burgoon et al., 1990; Mehrabian & Williams, 1969).

In service situations where customers typically have encounters with different employees, they are likely to have a lasting impression that the firm and its employees are customer-oriented if those employees greet the customers with a smile. If the service employee's smile is accompanied by eye contact, the impact is even greater. While smiling will create the perceptions of warmth and friendliness, employees' eye contact will give the impression that they are sincere about their interest in their customers. As an example, airlines typically have their crew greet customers while boarding and unboarding the aircraft. It is imperative for employees to smile at and have eye contact with each customer (Sundram & Webster, 2000).

#### Paralanguage

The second communication cue is paralanguage that is an indication for vocal tones that is use in communication show different interpretation when construed. For example, a communicator might use a verbal statement to convey confidence, e.g., "I am positively sure that...". But listeners will consciously and unconsciously interpret the paralanguage to assess the communicator's degree of confidence. Research reveals that when a listener or receiver attempts to judge where the speaker or source is on a contempt-affection continuum, they rely more on the tone of the voice than on the content of the message. This fact is evident from Argyle et al.'s (1970) study that found that even when the content of the message was disturbed by means of random splicing of the tape, listeners were able to detect the emotions expressed in the message based only on the tone of the voice.

Ruben (1988) pointed out that although what we say; the words, phrases and sentences are important to communication, the way we use language can be even more important than our words as sources of information. Paralanguage, sometimes called vocalic refer to any cues created in the process of verbalizing other than the words themselves. This includes sniff and sneezes, pitch, rate of speech, nasality, pauses and even silence. With spoken language, loudness, rate of speaking, tone, pitch variation and uses of pauses can have major influence on whether and how one can react to the words.

#### Proxemics

The third communication cue is proxemics that focuses on distance and touch. The theory of relational communication suggests that the use of the nonverbal cue of touch in an interpersonal exchange can increase attentional arousal and interpersonal involvement and significantly impact recipients' attitudes toward the source of the touch. Specifically, studies on the role of touch in interpersonal communication reveal that touch enhances one's interpersonal involvement, positive affect, social attachment, intimacy, and overall liking (Price et al., 1995). The persuasive power of touch is further evident in the findings of Patterson et al. (1986) stating that people tend to associate positive characteristics with the individual who touched them. Further, these individuals are more likely to act positively toward those who touched them. For instance, when a guest at a hotel complains about the room service, the manager

in charge would pat at the back of the annoyed guest to calm him or her down.

Proxemics is the study of personal space (O'Hair et al., 2002). Space plays an important role in communication. Personal space, or the distance between communicators, has two aspects; actual distance, which can be measured in feet and inches, and perceived distance, which varies among speakers. People differ in their need for personal distance. Some prefer very close communicating distance; others require greater separation. Different cultures view the use of space differently.

#### Physical Appearance

The last nonverbal communication cue is physical appearance that is an important determinant of perception in interpersonal interactions. Studies suggest that physically attractive communicators are more persuasive (Chaiken, 1979), successful in changing attitudes (Kahle & Homer, 1985), and are perceived as being more friendly than less attractive communicators. Further, more attractive people are perceived to be warmer, more poised, and more socially skilled than less attractive people (Chaiken, 1979).

Ruben (1988) indicated that there are evidences from other studies that suggests that physical attractiveness is not only important to dating preferences, but also is often a predictor of how successful, popular, sociable, sexually attractive, persuasive and even how happy people are. A number of factors contribute to appearance which among them is face, eyes, physique, dress and adornment.

#### Theoretical framework

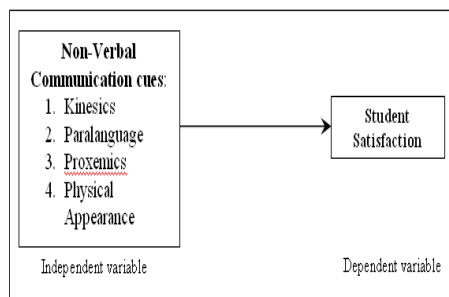


Figure 2.1 Research Model

#### Hypotheses

H<sub>1</sub>: There is a significant relationship between kinesics and student satisfaction.

H<sub>2</sub>: There is a significant relationship between paralanguage and student satisfaction.

H<sub>3</sub>: There is a significant relationship between proxemics and student satisfaction.

H<sub>4</sub>: There is a significant relationship between physical appearance and student satisfaction.

H<sub>5a</sub>: Kinesics is the most dominant non-verbal communication cue to student satisfaction.

H<sub>5b</sub>: Paralanguage is the most dominant non-verbal communication cue to student satisfaction.

H<sub>5c</sub>: Proxemics is the most dominant non-verbal communication cue to student satisfaction.

H<sub>5d</sub>: Physical appearance is the most dominant non-verbal communication cue to student satisfaction.

#### Sample and population

The population of this study was all the students from UiTM Kedah that has experienced studying in this university. The respondents which covers various demographic factors such as ages, genders, educational background and family background was selected to provide better insight to the present

study. A sample size of 300 participants will be generated from various courses offered by using non probability sampling technique in which units of the sample are selected on the basis of convenience or personal judgment sampling. Using this sampling technique was to ensure every unit in the population had an equal chance to be selected as the sample of this study. This method was also used in order to obtain a large number of completed questionnaires quickly and economically, due to time and budget constraints.

#### Data collection method

The instrument that was used to collect data for the present study was self-administered questionnaire which contain 30 questions. The questionnaire was divided into three sections. The first section had 19 questions which included items of the independent variables which are the non-verbal communication cues; kinesics, paralanguage, proxemics and physical appearance.

The second section included questions from the dependent variable which is student satisfaction. The questionnaire contains overall questions on the effects of each independent variable to student satisfaction. This question was adapted from Ooi (2005). The last segment was respondent's demographic particulars section. It contains four questions which were on respondents' age, gender, highest completed education level and family background. These questions were also an adoption from Ooi (2005).

#### Data analysis procedures

The data analysis of the present study employed SPSS statistical software version 17.0. The statistical tools adopted in this study were frequency analysis, descriptive statistics, reliability analysis and Regression analysis and Correlation analysis.

#### Findings

##### Profile of the respondents

From the 300 respondents received in this sample out of 330 questionnaires that was distributed, a wide range of demographical characteristics was examined. On the issue of gender, the sample was predominantly females with 76.3% compared to men 23.7%. This figure could be due to the random distribution of the questionnaire and did not directly portray the true nature of the population at large.

A look at the age factor showed the majority were 20 years old which is 42%, while a considerable number were 19 years old which is 38%, followed by 14.3% respondents in the 21 years old category. There were only 3.7% respondents in 22 years old category and 2% from the category of 19 years old. This was again due to random distribution of the questionnaire which might not indicate the whole population.

The respondents' marital status showed that a large number (99.7%) were single, while it was followed with only 0.3% were married respondents. There were no respondents in the divorced category. Based on the cross tabulation of gender and marital status, we noticed that more single women were the respondents of the present research.

In term of place of the origin of the respondents, results vary in all categories. It was showed that most of the respondents were from Kedah state (69.3%). This was followed by 9.7% of the respondents were from Perak, 6.3% from Selangor and Penang individually, 3.7% from Kuala Lumpur, 2% from Kelantan and only 0.3% from the rest of the states in Malaysia.

Finally on the issues of residency, respondents were mostly resident in the university (71%), and this leave to only 29% of the respondent to be to non-resident. Non-resident refers to students who stay out of the university at the nearby housing area.

#### **Descriptive analysis**

From the results, it showed that two of the variables were more to the right on the five-point scale. The mean value reflected an average value for the independent variables but a high value for student satisfaction. For proxemics and physical appearance, the mean value was more to the left of the five-point scale. It can be inferred that the respondents were more satisfied on the kinesics and paralanguage of the lecturers as both of these variable shows the highest value among the independent variables.

#### **Correlation analysis**

For the present study, Pearson correlation coefficient was used to measure the strength of association among the variables used. The paired variables recording correlation with double star had the strongest relationship and produced significant results. For example, the correlation between dependent variable (student satisfaction) and the all the independent variables were very significant except with physical appearance. Besides that, it also showed that the interrelation among the variables used. As such these variables showed significant relationships and had strong possibility to support the hypotheses testing in the regression analysis.

#### **Regression Analysis - Test for Each Independent Variable to Customer Satisfaction**

From the result it shows three variables (kinesics, paralanguage and proxemics) were significantly associated with customer satisfaction ( $p = 0.005$ ). Therefore, these independent variables have significant relationship with students' satisfaction and with this, hypotheses  $H_1$ ,  $H_2$  and  $H_3$  is accepted. The highest standardized beta value of 0.227 indicated that kinesics is the most dominant non-verbal communication cue to students' satisfaction. Thus Hypothesis  $5_a$  is accepted.

#### **Discussion**

##### **The Relationship of Non-Verbal Communication Cues to Students' Satisfaction**

The empirical evidence from the present study identified that among the four dimensions of non-verbal communication, three (i.e. kinesics, paralanguage and proxemics) contributed to students' satisfaction in the context of lecturers in UiTM Kedah. It indicated that there was a significant relationship between all these independent variables to students' satisfaction. This finding is aligned with findings from Sundram and Webster (2000), Gabbott and Hogg (2000), Fatt (1997) and Haktanir and Harris (2005) which also indicated that there was a significant relationship of non-verbal communication cues to customer satisfaction. The findings are accordance, which would suggest that the way customers like to be treated are similar at any given time and place.

These variables in the present study that are closely linked to students' satisfaction shows that it is important for individuals (lecturers in this context) to understand their non-verbal behavior as every unspoken behavior provides, if not large, a little impact to their students' satisfaction. Besides, the findings also indicate that students' satisfaction is not only on how well the lecturers verbal communication are, but proof a significant result that non-verbal communication plays an important determinant to students' satisfaction too.

Kinesics that is also known as body movements was shown to have the most impact on students' satisfaction. This result is supported by Sundram and Webster (2000) that pointed out that the important non-verbal communication cue that leads to customer satisfaction was body movements and facial expressions. Therefore, from this study, it can be inferred that students' in Malaysian universities are mostly observant on the body movements used as well as the body gestures of their lecturers when lectures are delivered to them.

Paralanguage was the second biggest impact to students' satisfaction. This study is supported by a research carried out by Means (2004) that mentioned that paralanguage involves the nonverbal symbols that accompany a verbal message and reveal the difference between what is said and how it is said. As it is important to satisfy the students, proper vocal pitch and tone used will help the students' to learn better and adapt better to learning environment.

On top of that, Proxemics also showed a marginal but significant effect to customer satisfaction. It is proven in the Correlation Test that indicated the existence of relationship between these variables to customer satisfaction. This result is supported by Sundram and Webster (2000) that pointed out that the important non-verbal communication cue that leads to customer satisfaction was distance and touch. Therefore, from this study, it can be inferred that customers in Malaysia are mostly observant on the touch used as well as the body gestures or distance of employees when services are delivered to them.

#### **Implication of the study**

##### **Theoretical implication**

From the theoretical aspect, the finding of the present study implies that there is a strong causal relationship between non-verbal communication cues to students' satisfaction, as being supported by past researches. The non-verbal communication dimensions under study encompass various aspects of unspoken behavior provided by the lecturers when providing services like lectures and consultation with the students. A positive relationship between various aspects of non-verbal communication cues and students' satisfaction means that non-verbal communication is an antecedent that will affect students' satisfaction. This implies that any effort to enhance students' satisfaction should be preceded by improvement in non-verbal communication behavior.

##### **Managerial implication**

Concerning the managerial implications, the findings of the present study offer sufficient depth of insights into the specific areas that require the attention and improvement action of management of universities. Students tend to feel dissatisfied with service provider which has non-verbal communication cues that were rated at moderate or bad level (Gabbott & Hogg, 2000). Thus, the first step for management of universities to overcome this situation is by conducting non-verbal communication training to the all employees especially lecturers' in this context. This step is supported by Jolly (2000) which mentioned that managers in service companies must make sure that employees' non-verbal behavior should be trained in order to act in certain ways to provide the best non-verbal communication behavior as it would lead to customer satisfaction. Therefore, management of universities should be aware of this satisfaction and train their employees to be sensitive to their own non-verbal communication behavior that they portray when delivering services to the customers (students in this context). By being aware of their non-verbal behavior,

they will be able to control unwanted non-verbal communication behavior to guarantee students' ultimate satisfaction.

Besides, it is vital for management of service companies to understand the importance of non-verbal communication in providing customer satisfaction and be able to communicate these understandings to service employees. This is to make sure that the employees would first understand what non-verbal communication is. This statement is supported by research conducted by Lemmink and Mattsson (2002). By communicating the understanding of non-verbal communication, the employees would know the importance of non-verbal communication that would provide satisfaction to customers. It was also indicated that given the same situation, non-verbal communication behaviors differ from one individual to another (Jolly, 2000). Consequently, understanding of non-verbal communication among employees would lead to a better service as the lecturers are aware that different students would perceive differently on their non-verbal communication behavior.

On top of that, since the finding of the present study shows that there is a significant relationship between non-verbal communication cues to students' satisfaction in the context of lecturers, management of universities could conduct a periodic survey of students' satisfaction on lecturers' non-verbal communication behavior. This solution was also suggested by Sundram and Webster (2000) in their article, "The Role of Non-Verbal Communication in Service Encounter". By conducting a periodic survey, the managers would be able to obtain significant results that would indicate changes in the satisfaction level. By having such result, the managements would then be able to conduct a corrective action in order to increase the satisfaction level of the students. In a nutshell, periodic survey would lead to continuous improvements that would enhance the image of the university.

What is more important is that management of universities to provide feedback on employees' performances on non-verbal communication. By practicing this, employees (lecturers) would be able to analyze where they stand and what action to take in order to enhance their performance. Also, managements may also provide incentive for employees to behave in certain way as well as for them to apply in training sessions. Incentive could be in monetary or non-monetary term; depending on the needs of the employees. The best incentive would be the one that suits what the employees want the most. Sundram and Webster (2000) mentioned that the incentive program as a way to enhance employees' motivation in order to portray the best non-verbal communication behavior. Thus, with these students satisfaction could be augmented.

#### **Limitations of the study**

One of the limitations of the present study is that the questionnaires were only distributed in one local university which is University Teknologi Mara Kedah due to major constrain of time and finance. Coupled with the small sample size of 330 respondents, the findings of the present study may not represent the actual situation in Malaysia as a whole.

Furthermore, the availability of previous studies and questionnaire could have made the present study better under the Malaysian context of study. Lack of references of non-verbal communication in term of Malaysian context made the present study less competent. On top of that, most of the respondents were from lower semester level which might lead them to have lesser experience studying with different lecturers. This might

have led the study to be unable to get the correct idea of the non-verbal communication cues of the lecturers.

Lastly, the present study only specified on students' satisfaction of the lecturers' non-verbal communication behavior. Wider scope of service industry would provide a better and more significant results as well as better conclusions on the variables involved.

#### **Suggestions for future research**

There are some suggestions for the future study on the similar topic. Since the present study was developed from past literature and was built on a conceptual framework without prior statistical support, more in depth research should be carried out to reveal better concrete empirical evidence on the effect of non-verbal communication cues to students' satisfaction in service industry mainly education. It is hoped that the results obtained from the present study can be considered as a fundamental groundwork to spur future research. A more comprehensive instrument should also be developed to effectively solicit the correct responses needed and produce more substantial results.

Moreover, other key determinants should also be integrated into the future study to test moderating as well as intermediary effects on the independent and dependent variables. This will enable researchers to examine a wider scope of hypotheses and better unravel the mysteries of the relationship of non-verbal communication cues to students' satisfaction.

Furthermore, the scope of the future study could be wider by including more service industries and not focusing only on a certain industry; in this case is the education industry. Better visibility of the result could be obtained through wider scope and thus will lead to more significant outcomes for enhanced conclusions.

#### **Conclusion**

A wise man once said, "Action speaks louder than words". Looking at the study by Philpot (1983), it was concluded that 65% of the meaning of conversational messages comes from non-verbal communication cues, leaving only 35% to verbal communication. People's opinions usually are based on the non-verbal communication symbols they observe and how they interpret them. Studies have found that when judging attitude, people based 93% of their judgment on non-verbal symbols and 7% on spoken words (Means, 2004). Thus, the statement of "action speaks louder than words" is fairly true.

But, nonverbal behavior remains virtually unexplored despite its importance with respect to the outcome of service encounters that would lead to customer satisfaction. Clearly, the present study has proven that there is a significant relationship of non-verbal communication cues to students' satisfaction in service encounters with lecturers. These findings are aligned with a few previous studies.

The sender of non-verbal communication may be unaware that he or she is sending a non-verbal message. Consequently, he or she may not be aware of the impact that the non-verbal message may have. Since the non-verbal message may be transmitted unconsciously, the sender will not have planned it. Therefore, a non-verbal message can be more reliable than an oral or written message.

It is the greatest hope that the new millennium will see more of research on non-verbal communication cues and how it effects students' satisfaction in various aspects; so that more will be aware of the importance of non-verbal communication that we portray in every day life.

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