

A study on the Impact of Consultants' Nonverbal Communication on Customer Satisfaction, Trust, and Long-term Relationship Orientation of the Client Firm

SungHee Yoon¹, SangBong Kim^{2*}, JungRyol Kim² and YenYoo You¹

¹Department of Knowledge Service and Consulting, Hansung University, Seoul, Korea; coolyshkr@naver.com, threey0818@hansung.ac.kr

²Department of Economics, Hansung University, Seoul, Korea; brainkim75@hansung.ac.kr, jrkim@hansung.ac.kr

Abstract

Background/ Objectives: The purpose of this study is to verify the importance of nonverbal communication of consultants on customer satisfaction, trust and long-term relationship orientation. **Methods/ Statistical Analysis:** To test the validity and reliability of our measuring tools, we perform an exploratory factor analysis. All variables were tested through a principal component analysis. To determine the number of factors and simplify the factor loading, the varimax rotation method was used. **Findings:** Our main findings show that, among the specific features of nonverbal communication, both spatial language and appearance language significantly affect customer satisfaction. Body language, spatial language, and appearance language were found to have significant effects on customer trust. Nonverbal communication also has a significant impact on customer satisfaction and on the long-term relationship orientation of client. **Application/ Improvement:** The present study analyses the impact of nonverbal communication on customers, with the aim of strengthening consultants' competencies, as well as contributing to the growth and development of the consulting industry by filling the existing gap in the literature.

Keywords: Customer Satisfaction, Long-term Relationship Orientation, Nonverbal Communication, Trust

1. Introduction

Management consulting can improve business productivity. The introduction of an appropriate management technique could help the growth and development of the business, and solve management difficulties. As competition is increasing, adopting the right strategies to survive in a rapidly changing global environment became crucial for business, and has led to the gradual expansion of the consulting industry. Previous studies showed that the capacity of consultants to provide face-to-face services to business is gaining importance in the market. Accordingly, the consulting outcome depends on it. Despite the existence of various studies on consulting practices, there

seem to be no research yet focusing on nonverbal communication among consultants. The present study analyses the impact of nonverbal communication on customers, with the aim of strengthening consultants' competencies, as well as contributing to the growth and development of the consulting industry by filling the existing gap in the literature.

2. Theoretical Background

The existing research on nonverbal communication in the service industry has mainly focused on individuals who carry out customer response services, at the service encounter for customer satisfaction, such as sales people,

*Author for correspondence

dining-out industry employees, aviation service industry employees, hotel service industry employees, and medical industry employees.

On the contrary, this study tries to investigate the effects of nonverbal communication of consultants, who deal with business people, addressing their management difficulties and suggesting solutions related to customer relations and satisfaction.

The existing literature on nonverbal communication can be summarized as follows.

Found that verbal and nonverbal communication skills of family restaurant employees affect significantly clients, with body language being the main determinant of customer satisfaction¹.

In a study performed on the effect of doctors' non-verbal communication on patient orientation and satisfaction, long-term relational orientation and structural relationship between word-of-mouth intention within the medical service environment². Both language and auditory language are shown to have a positive effect on customer orientation, while only body language had a positive impact on customer satisfaction. In the consulting industry, where projects must be executed at a customer touch point, various efforts of the service provider might make the clients feel grateful or perceive the emotion that they have obtained value. Consultants can satisfy the clients through such benefits offered to them, and enhance loyalty by encouraging constant interaction³.

Found that regarding the nonverbal communication used among an airline cabin crew, physical language, pseudo language, and appearance language significantly affected customer satisfaction, while spatial language had no significant effect⁴.

Argued that in the service industry, nonverbal communication affects how the customer evaluates the service provider, suggesting that friendliness, politeness, empathy, capability, and reliability are important factors⁵.

Found that a consultant's physical and auditory language positively affected the reliable assessment of various customer evaluation factors. Here, physical language, spatial language, and appearance language positively affected eligibility evaluation among these various factors⁶.

2.1 Nonverbal Communication

Most service delivery industries involve important interpersonal contact between the service provider and the customer. Interpersonal communication is important in pure services. These variables are related without needing

a high degree of interpersonal interaction and the actual exchange of goods. The nonverbal aspect of interpersonal communication is in the form conveying one's thoughts and emotions. Nonverbal factors play just as important a role as verbal factors in forming a customer's emotional experience⁷.

Even though in many situations verbal expression is enough to deliver one's intention, there are many cases where nonverbal communication is essential to reading others' emotions or delivering one's intentions. This typically happens because verbal expression has objective limitations, and because a lot of information needs to be acquired in a short period of time⁸.

Communication occurs through both verbal and non-verbal methods. Communicating via methods other than words is called nonverbal communication⁹.

In communication, there are more nonverbal elements (93%) than verbal elements (7%)¹⁰.

Thus, nonverbal communication is defined as type of interaction without language, and it has been shown to be as important as verbal communication in interpersonal communications.

2.2 Components of Nonverbal Communication

Previous studies related to nonverbal communication have suggested several components of nonverbal communication.

For instance, showed that nonverbal communication significantly affects customers' evaluation of service providers in the service industry. In their study, they classified nonverbal communication elements into body language, spatial language, auditory language, and appearance language.

Classified nonverbal communication more comprehensively into seven areas, defined as physical activities, pseudo-languages, physical contact behaviors, spatial behaviors, physical characteristics, decorations, and environmental factors¹¹.

2.2.1 Body Language

Body language pertains to movements and nonverbal signals that can include one's physical attitude, eye contact, nodding, and smiling. In other words, Body language refers to the communicative acts of expressing intention and supplementing speech with various gestures, postures, and facial expressions¹².

Gestures effectively help communication and amplify the delicacy of expressions: according to using a lot of gestures make one appear comfortable, attractive, professional, trustworthy, kind, and persuasive¹³.

2.2.2 Spatial language

Proxemics is a nonverbal element appearing in communications, and it can be explained by postures related to the distance between the interaction targets¹⁴.

For instance, the space and distance between an employee and a customer at the point of service where interaction with the customer occurs is highly likely to affect the customer's response. As one example, the customer may feel threatened if the employee encroaches a psychological barrier between the employee and customer. Conversely, the customer may feel the employee is unfriendly or dismissive if the employee is too far away¹⁵.

2.2.3 Auditory Language

Auditory language, also called paralanguage, relates to age, gender, social rank, occupation, and level of education, which are sometimes determinants of paralinguistic differences¹⁶.

In the service industry, customers build their confidence not only through the contents exposed by service providers, but also through their pitch and tone¹⁷.

According to previous studies on voice characteristics, proper pauses increase listeners' understanding, and reinforce the perception of trust and belief¹⁸.

2.2.4 Appearance Language

Appearance language involves nonverbal elements, such as an external physical trait, that play a role in communication. These include physical attractiveness, hairstyle, clothing, and accessories¹⁹.

Showed that physical attractiveness is very effective in persuading others and may also influences changes in attitude²⁰.

Suggested that the way one dresses deliver information about oneself, whether intended or unintended. In many cases, the first impression is determined by clothing, and dressing appropriately is likely to elicit trust²¹.

2.3 Customer Satisfaction

Customer Satisfaction is defined as "a consumer's subjective evaluation on the degree of satisfaction and the

demand by either acquiring or consuming the product or service provided."²²

Customer satisfaction is defined as the emotional response towards specific products, services, and experiences related to or caused by retailers, shopping, purchase behaviors, meaning that the emotional dimension of customers' consumption experience is emphasized²³.

While this may be an overstatement, the message presentation is more important than the message itself. The service provider should clearly keep in mind that communication style is a determining factor for customer satisfaction. The particular style is not only important for connecting the customer with a service provider but also establishing customer trust and satisfaction²⁴.

Identifying significant examples of nonverbal communication related to customer satisfaction and loyalty can lead to the development of better customer and employee interactions, especially when nonverbal communication is delivered through what is known as service personalization²⁵.

2.4 Trust

Trust plays an important role in forming long-term relationships: it lies at the core of long-term and continuous relationships. Building close relations is essential to gain customer loyalty²⁶.

Trust, being a precondition for maintaining a continuous and long-term relationship, is important to achieve loyalty, and it is built through goodwill in specific situations, operation capabilities, problem solving skills, and trust on front-line employees²⁷.

2.5 Long-term Relationship Orientation

In the consulting industry, it is important to build revenue-generating structures through long-term business relationships. This allows the reduction of marketing costs, increases efficiency, and helps not losing customers to competitors. Strengthening the relationship with customers by recognizing them as partners and sharing provisional plans allows building stable revenue for business growth. This attitude can be explained by the concept of long-term relationship orientation²⁸.

Trust and dependence play important roles in long-term relationship orientation for both sellers and buyers²⁹.

Investing time and resources to satisfy customers' perceptions and expectations shows the intention of the seller

to develop a long-term relationship, and leads customers to stay within the relationship, promoting their expectations of reward³⁰.

3. Research Models and Hypothesis

3.1 Research Model Derivation

In this section, we present our model, as shown in Figure 1. The use of this model is by motivated previous studies on the topic, as discussed above

The hypothesized research model is as follows:

- H1) Among the various forms of nonverbal communication, body language has a significant effect on Customer Satisfaction
- H2) Spatial language has a significant effect on Customer Satisfaction.
- H3) Auditory language has a significant effect on Customer Satisfaction.
- H4) Appearance language has a significant effect on customer Satisfaction.
- H5) body language has a significant effect on trust.
- H6) Spatial language has a significant effect on trust.
- H7) Auditory language has a significant effect on trust.
- H8) Appearance language has a significant effect on trust.
- H9) Customer satisfaction has a significant effect on long-term relationship orientation
- H10) Trust has a significant effect on long-term relationship orientation.

3.2 Research Subjects and Data Collection

The present study involved a basic statistical analysis of 142 surveys administered between July 10, 2015 and August 16, 2015, to domestic small-to-medium-sized enterprises with consulting experience. The main relationships of

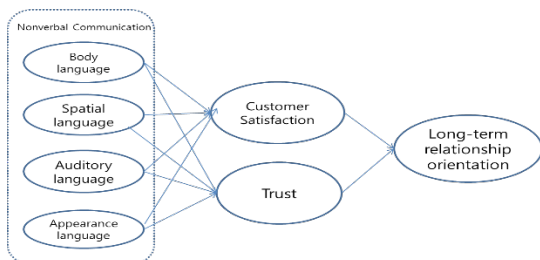


Figure 1. Research model.

interest were the effects of nonverbal communication on customer orientation, trust, and satisfaction.

4. Data Analysis and Results

4.1 Sample Characteristics

76.8% of the respondent enterprises were stock corporations, and 20.4% were individual businesses. In terms of industry, 50% were manufacturing firms, 27.5% included wholesale and retail businesses, 17.6% were service industries, and 2.1% were construction firms. In terms of consulting fields, financial management accounted for 63.4%, marketing for 15.5%, and production technology for 13.4%. Motivations for receiving consulting were institutional suggestions (59.9%), organizational needs (23.2%), and recommendations (12.7%).

4.2 Exploratory Factor Analysis

To test the validity and reliability of our measuring tools, we perform an exploratory factor analysis. All variables were tested through a principal component analysis. To determine the number of factors and simplify the factor loading, the varimax rotation method was used. The factor loading represents the degree of correlation between each variable and factor. The results of the factor analysis performed on the independent variable "nonverbal communication" are reported in Table 1. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value, which measures the appropriateness of the number of observed values with

Table1. Factor analysis results(1)

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
Apearance2	.801	.325	.367	.310
Apearance1	.779	.380	.311	.347
Apearance	.747	.382	.333	.389
Auditory2	.405	.734	.394	.355
Auditory1	.429	.712	.388	.354
Auditory3	.398	.682	.430	.369
Body4	.439	.457	.692	.293
Body5	.378	.408	.685	.415
Body6	.401	.443	.634	.419
Spatial3	.471	.406	.407	.654
Spatial2	.478	.404	.364	.650
Spatial4	.466	.411	.404	.636

respect to the number of variables, is 0.914, significantly larger than the general level of 0.7. The p-value of Bartlett's sphericity test is .000, meaning that our tests are statistically significant.

Since each factor loading was larger than the general criteria of 0.5 and all commonalities were larger than the general criteria of 0.4, we confirm the validity of our measure.

The results of the validity test on the dependent variables of trust, customer satisfaction, and long-term relationship orientation are shown in Table 2. Also in this case, both the results of the KMO test and Bartlett's sphericity tests are statistically significant.

Since each factor loading was larger than the general criteria of 0.5 and all commonalities were larger than the general criteria of 0.4, we confirm the validity of our measure.

Table 2. Factor analysis results(2)

	Component		
	1	2	3
trust2	.887	.328	.273
trust1	.857	.354	.313
trust4	.733	.401	.427
long-term1	.337	.881	.231
long-term3	.334	.858	.308
long-term2	.340	.855	.311
satisfaction3	.565	.448	.669
satisfaction2	.585	.458	.621
satisfaction4	.590	.479	.612

To address the reliability of our measure, we performed a Cronbach's alpha test, which measures inter-item consistency, and the test results range from 0.958 to 0.984.

The complete test results are presented in Table 3.

4.3 Correlation Analyses

The criterion-related validity of each research unit was tested performing a correlation analysis on all factors. The result was 1.000 or less, meaning that the criterion-related validity was granted. Significant correlations were also found among research units, such as nonverbal communication, trust, customer satisfaction, and long-term relationship orientation. The results of correlation analysis are presented in Table 4.

Table 3. Reliability analysis results

Item	No. of Question	Cronbach' alpha
body L.	3	0.971
Spatial L.	3	0.979
Auditory L.	3	0.982
Appearance L.	3	0.984
Trust	3	0.958
long-term R.	3	0.969
Customer S.	3	0.976

Table 4. Correlations analysis

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
body L.	1						
Spatial L.	.936**	1					
Auditory L.	.945**	.919**	1				
Appearance LI	.886**	.919**	.889**	1			
Trust	.918**	.918**	.886**	.913**	1		
Long-term R.	.719**	.711**	.699**	.632**	.690**	1	
Customer S.	.884**	.864**	.854**	.869**	.897**	.861**	1
CR	0.988	0.991	0.992	0.994	0.989	0.987	0.987
AVE	0.964	0.973	0.975	0.981	0.967	0.949	0.952

*p < 0.05 **p < 0.01

Table 5. Fit indexes

Fit indexes	Standards	Results
Chi-Square	-	477.279
df	-	168
P	>0.05	0
CMIN/DF	< 3	2.841
GFI	>0.9	0.772
AGFI	>0.9	0.687
CFI	>0.9	0.95
NFI	>0.9	0.925
IFI	>0.9	0.95
RMR	<0.05	0.011
RMSEA	<0.05	0.114

Table 6. Results of hypothesis testing

Path	path coefficient	C.R	P-Value	Result
Body Language ---> Customer Satisfaction(H1)	0.306	1.92	0.055	Reject
Spatial Language ---> Customer Satisfaction(H2)	0.284	2.026	0.043*	Accepted
Auditory Language ---> Customer Satisfaction(H3)	0.076	0.597	0.55	Reject
Appearance Language ---> Customer Satisfaction(H4)	0.266	2.505	0.012*	Accepted
Body Language ---> Trust(H5)	0.257	2.173	0.030*	Accepted
Spatial Language ---> Trust(H6)	0.48	4.552	0.000***	Accepted
Auditory Language ---> Trust(H7)	0.002	0.025	0.98	Reject
Auditory Language ---> Trust(H8)	0.243	3.084	0.002**	Accepted
Customer Satisfaction ---> Long-term relationship orientation(H9)	1.092	7.485	0.000***	Accepted
Trust ---> Long-term relationship orientation(H10)	0.211	-0.925	0.325	Reject

*p>.05, **p>.01, ***p>.001

4.4 Research Model Test

The research model was tested with structural equations and the goodness-of-fit model, as shown in Table 5.

The goodness-of-fit of the proposed model is described by the following parameters: $\chi^2=477.279$, $df=168$, $p=0.000$, $CMIN/df=2.841$, $RMR=0.011$, $GFI=0.772$, $AGFI=0.687$, $NFI=0.925$, $CFI=0.950$, $RMSEA=0.114$, which is generally satisfactory, except for a few indices.

The relationship between nonverbal communication and customer satisfaction was tested and the path coefficients, describing the link between spatial language and customer satisfaction related to nonverbal communication of consultants, was found to be 0.284 ($t=2.026$). Our results confirm that the higher the perception on spatial language, the larger the satisfaction of customers. In addition, the path coefficient describing the link between the appearance language and customer satisfaction was 0.266 ($t=2.505$), confirming that the higher perception of the appearance language, the larger the satisfaction of customers. Therefore, hypothesis 2 and 4 were accepted.

The relationship between nonverbal communication and trust was also tested and the path coefficients, describing the link between body language and trust related to nonverbal communication of consultants, was found to be 0.257 ($t=2.173$), confirming that the higher the perception on body language, the larger the trust.

The path coefficients between spatial language and trust related to nonverbal communication of consultants was 0.480 ($t=4.552$), confirming that the higher the perception on the spatial language, the larger the trust.

The path coefficients between appearance language and trust related to nonverbal communication of consultants was 0.243 ($t=3.084$), which confirmed that the higher the perception on the appearance language, the larger the trust. Therefore, hypothesis 5, 6, 8 were accepted.

The path coefficients between customer satisfaction and long-term relationship orientation was 1.092 ($t=7.485$), which confirmed that the higher the perception on long-term relationship orientation, the larger the satisfaction of customers. Therefore, hypothesis 9 was accepted.

The results are summarized in Table 6. The criterion-related validity of each research unit was tested performing a correlation analysis on all factors. The result was 1.000 or less, meaning that the criterion-related validity was granted. Significant correlations

5. Conclusions

The present study tried to investigate the relationship between nonverbal communication of consultants and customers' attitudes, such as customer satisfaction, trust, and long-term relationship orientation.

The results and implications of this study are summarized as follows:

First, we analyzed the significance of nonverbal communication, which is fundamental for consultants, who directly provide customers with information services. Being aware of nonverbal communication is important to identify customer's difficulties, proposing appropriate solutions, and persuading clients. Our main findings show that both spatial language and appearance language are fundamental elements in the relationship between nonverbal communication and customer satisfaction, and both significantly affect customer satisfaction. Nonverbal communication affects the building of trust through external appearance, such as neat dressing and tidy hairstyle, and our findings confirm the importance of psychological distance between communication targets.

Second, we investigated the relationship between nonverbal communication of consultants and trust. Body language, spatial language, and appearance were found to affect customer trust significantly. Body language such as gestures, eye contact, and smiles significantly affect trust, and elements of spatial language, such as psychological conversation distance from customers, and appearance languages, such as hairstyles and attires, are also found to affect customer trust. Spatial language was found to have the largest impact on trust.

Third, we show a positive relationship between customer satisfaction and long-term relationship orientation. The higher the satisfaction of customers, the stronger their long-term relationship orientation in the business relation with the consultant.

The present study tried to investigate the impact of nonverbal communication of consultants. As part of their job, consultants meet customers, address customers' management difficulties, and propose appropriate solutions to improve customer satisfaction, trust, and long-term relationship orientation. Further research is needed, as nonverbal communication of service providers seems to influence customer trust and satisfaction even more than verbal communication, at least in some contexts.

In addition, to improve consultants' competencies, attention should be paid to educating not only on

simple job related skills, but also on nonverbal means of communication related to customer response.

This study suffers limitations due to sample size: the influence of nonverbal communication on customers could be different depending on the characteristics of the consulting service, size of business, and motivation for consulting, and a follow-up study is needed to improve the understanding of the impact and scope of consulting services.

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