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Nonverbal Determinants of First Impressions in Face-to-Face Interaction: A Critical Review

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Abstract:

First impressions formed within moments of encountering others serve as cognitive shortcuts that significantly influence interpersonal trajectories across professional, social, and clinical domains. This critical review synthesizes empirical literature from 2015 to 2025 examining how nonverbal cues shape initial social evaluations in face-to-face interactions. By analysing methodologically diverse studies, we identify facial expressiveness as the nonverbal determinant of favorable first impressions, with increased expressiveness consistently correlating with higher ratings of warmth, likability, and trustworthiness. Studies also show that when people's body language, facial expressions, and voice work together smoothly, others understand them better. When some cues are hidden, like when wearing a mask, people focus more on visible cues like the eyes. Reduced facial expression, especially in people with mental health conditions, leads to more negative first impressions. These nonverbal effects also happen over video calls, which is important in today's digital world. This review highlights three main insights: Facial expressions are the most important nonverbal cue; Nonverbal cues work better together than alone; Surprisingly, hiding some cues can actually improve first impressions by drawing attention to the most important ones. These findings can help improve therapy, job training, online meeting tools, and social skills programs. Methodological limitations in current research include overemphasis on facial cues at the expense of other nonverbal channels, heterogeneous methodologies complicating cross-study comparison, and insufficient attention to cultural moderators. Future research should study how different nonverbal cues work together, track how first impressions change over time, and examine how digital communication affects these signals. This review helps improve how people communicate and shows what still needs to be studied.

Keywords: *First impressions, Nonverbal communication, Facial expressions, Social perception, Impression formation, Interpersonal communication*

Introduction:

People make fast, lasting first impressions that have significant effects in work, health, and social settings. Within seconds of encountering others, we make spontaneous judgments about their trustworthiness, competence, warmth, and approachability. These judgments subsequently shape interactions in employment contexts [1], [2], healthcare relationships [3], [4], and social connections

[5], [6]. People rapidly form impressions from facial expressions[2], eye contact [7], and body posture[1]. However, individual differences and context also shape how these signals are interpreted, as seen in varying effects across clinical populations [8], [9] and digital settings [10].

Existing research has extensively documented effects of isolated nonverbal channels. Expansive postures correlate with perceptions of power and confidence [11], genuine smiles enhance likability and trust [5], and moderate eye contact promotes credibility [7]. However, these investigations typically examine cues in isolation, neglecting the dynamic, multimodal reality of face-to-face interaction where posture, facial expressions, gaze, and gestures co-occur, interact, and mutually influence each other in real time. This limits the theoretical understanding of how nonverbal signals function as integrated systems rather than independent channels. Understanding how digital platforms alter nonverbal signaling is increasingly important as remote work and telehealth expand, with recent studies examining facial expressiveness over video [12] and gaze in clinical video consultations [4].

This critical review addresses these gaps by synthesizing recent empirical literature (2015-2025) on nonverbal determinants of first impressions in face-to-face interactions. We address three primary questions: (1) Which nonverbal cues and cue combinations most consistently influence first impressions across diverse contexts? (2) Through what psychological mechanisms do these cues exert their effects? (3) What practical implications emerge for enhancing interpersonal communication in personal, professional, and clinical domains? By integrating findings across methodological approaches and participant populations, we aim to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how nonverbal behavior shapes the crucial initial moments of social encounter.

Methodological Approach:

To identify relevant literature, we conducted searches in PubMed, Google Scholar, and PsycINFO using combinations of terms related to nonverbal communication ("nonverbal behavior," "body language," "facial expression," "eye contact," "posture," "gesture") and impression formation ("first impression," "impression formation," "person perception," "social judgment," "thin slice"). We limited our search to empirical studies and reviews published between January 2015 and December 2025 to capture recent developments while including foundational work and emerging research on digital communication contexts.

Inclusion criteria required that studies: (1) examined at least one nonverbal cue in relation to first impression outcomes, (2) employed face-to-face or analogous in-person contexts (including digitally mediated face-to-face interaction), (3) measured impressions formed during initial exposure rather than established relationships, and (4) used empirical methodologies with human participants. We excluded studies focusing exclusively on verbal content, vocal qualities without visual components, or physical appearance attributes (e.g., clothing, attractiveness) without accompanying

dynamic nonverbal behavior.

Our final synthesis includes 18 studies that collectively represent diverse methodological approaches, including experimental manipulation of facial expressiveness, eye-tracking, clinical observation of affective display, digital alteration of nonverbal signals, and systematic reviews of gaze behavior. These studies span North American, European, and East Asian contexts and encompass a range of settings from laboratory experiments to naturalistic clinical observations. Sample sizes varied from focused experimental designs to larger online observer studies, with participant populations including general community samples, student groups, and clinical populations.

Due to the methodological heterogeneity and limited study numbers, we adopted a critical integrative approach, identifying consistent patterns, contradictions, and implications among the studies. This approach allows for nuanced understanding of how different methodological choices (e.g., stimulus type, measurement approach, context) might influence findings while highlighting areas of convergence relevant to both theoretical development and practical application.

Results and Discussion: How Body Language Shapes First Impressions:

Key Finding 1: Your Face Talks Before You Do

People who show more emotion on their faces, through smiling, eyebrow movements, and changing expressions, are immediately seen as friendlier, more trustworthy, and more likeable. Three different studies confirmed this [2], [3], [5]. Beyond actual expressions, anticipated facial expressions also drive social perception, with predictable faces rated as more likable and trustworthy [12].

A happy face makes people think you're warm and approachable, but it doesn't necessarily make them think you're more competent at your job. This suggests facial expressions tell people about your personality, not your skills. Gender further moderates these effects, with smiling increasing trustworthiness more for male faces than female faces in some contexts [13]. In one study, people with depression showed less facial emotion, and others rated them more negatively within seconds, even without knowing they had depression [8]. This shows our faces silently communicate how we're feeling inside.

Key Finding 2: Coordinated Body Language Works Better

It is not just about smiling or making eye contact separately. It is about timing. People whose facial expressions, head movements, and voice work together smoothly are understood better during first meetings [14]. Evidence suggests facial expressions and body postures are processed hierarchically rather than simultaneously, with mismatched cues causing delayed responses [15].

Key Finding 3: Masks Change What We Notice

During the pandemic, researchers discovered something unexpected. People wearing masks were sometimes rated as more attractive [10]. Eye-tracking showed that when the lower face was covered, people looked more at the eyes, making eye contact more powerful. Lighting also interacts

with gaze, with direct gaze enhancing trust more in well-lit conditions [16].

Sometimes having less visual information (like with masks or poor video quality) actually makes us focus more on what's still visible, changing our impressions. This challenges assumptions that more visual information necessarily yields better impressions. Instead, impression formation operates through selective attention mechanisms, with certain cues (like eyes) carrying disproportionate weight in social evaluation.

Key Finding 4: Video Calls Keep Body Language Important

Even on video calls like Zoom or FaceTime, facial expressions still matter. People who show more emotion on screen are still rated as warmer and more likeable [2]. The effect is slightly weaker for making people think you're competent. Video calls might be better for showing you are friendly than for showing you are skilled. Environmental factors like camera angle and lighting further moderate these effects in digital contexts.

What This All Means Together:

First impressions are not just about one thing (like smiling or eye contact). They come from:

How expressive your face is (more emotion = better first impression)

How well different signals work together (coordinated = better understood)

What people can actually see (masks and video quality change what we notice)

Whether you're in person or online (effects are similar but slightly different)

Interesting contradictions:

The context-dependent nature of eye contact:

Research reveals that eye contact functions differently depending on what is being evaluated. While direct gaze increases belief in specific uncertain statements [7], it shows minimal influence on overall person evaluation [17]. This distinction suggests that eye contact primarily enhances moment-to-moment credibility rather than shaping holistic person impressions, which integrate multiple verbal and nonverbal signals [18].

The nuanced relationship between smiling and perceived competence:

Although smiling reliably increases perceptions of warmth and likability [2], [5], its effect on perceived competence is more variable. In healthcare contexts, empathic nonverbal behavior including smiling can enhance both warmth and competence judgments [3], but in other professional settings, competence may be signalled more effectively through confident demeanour than pronounced smiling. This reflects the different social questions these impressions answer: smiling addresses interpersonal warmth ("Are you friendly?"), while competence judgments consider capability signals beyond mere expressiveness [13].

Limitations:

- Overemphasis on facial cues: Studies focus heavily on facial expressions but ignore body

posture, hand gestures, and how people stand or move.

- Artificial research settings: Many studies use photos or short videos instead of observing real conversations in natural settings.
- Limited cultural diversity: Most research uses college students from Western countries, leaving gaps in understanding how culture shapes nonverbal interpretation.
- Short-term focus: We don't know if these first impressions last or if they're accurate over time.
- Individual differences: We know little about why some people are better at reading body language than others.
- Measurement inconsistency: Studies use different methods (ratings, coding, eye-tracking) making direct comparisons challenging.

Practical Takeaways:

For everyday life:

- Showing emotion on your face helps people like you immediately
- Making different signals work together (face, voice, gestures) helps people understand you
- On video calls, facial expressions still matter—maybe even more since people have fewer cues

For special situations:

- People with depression or anxiety might benefit from knowing their neutral face affects how others see them
- Job interviewees should know that smiling helps with likability but might need other cues for showing competence
- During mask-wearing or poor video quality, eye contact becomes especially important

For digital communication design:

- Platform designers should optimize camera placement and lighting to preserve important nonverbal cues
- Video conferencing tools could benefit from features that maintain expressive range despite technological constraints
- Users should be aware that digital mediation can alter how their nonverbal signals are perceived

Future research should focus on:

- More studies on body posture and gestures (not just faces)
- Research in real-world settings (not just labs)
- Studies across different cultures
- Longer-term tracking of first impressions.
- Digital communication effects: How video calls, VR, and tech change body language.
- Ethical research practices: Ensuring studies protect privacy, especially when using digital face manipulation.

Conclusion:

This review shows that body language, especially facial expressions, powerfully shapes first impressions in both face-to-face and digital interactions. Rather than working through single, obvious rules (like "always smile" or "always make eye contact"), nonverbal cues work together in flexible, context-dependent ways.

Key takeaways include:

- Facial expressiveness strongly influences whether people see you as warm, likeable, and trustworthy.
- Coordinated signals (face, voice, posture working together) help others understand you better.
- Context changes everything. Eye contact builds trust in some situations but not others. Smiling increases liking but doesn't always signal competence.
- Digital communication preserves many nonverbal effects, but video quality, camera angles, and masks can alter which cues people notice.

These findings remind us that first impressions are quick but not simple. They emerge from a mix of visible behavior, personal differences, cultural norms, and communication setting. As more interaction moves online, designing platforms that support (rather than distort) natural body language becomes increasingly important. Ultimately, understanding how nonverbal cues shape first encounters can help us communicate more effectively, whether in person, on screen, or somewhere in between.

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