

DECODING NONVERBAL CUES: THE INTERPLAY OF IDENTITY AND COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: Social identities are complex constructs communicated through various nonverbal interactional cues. Nonverbal communication plays a crucial role in self-expression, emotion conveyance, and establishing social connections. This paper explores how nonverbal cues such as body language, facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice enable individuals to manifest their identities in diverse contexts. The research underscores the significance of nonverbal cues in social interactions, highlighting their role in conveying dominance within group conversations and influencing social cognition. Furthermore, nonverbal communication is pivotal in forming impressions and building trust in interpersonal relationships, extending its impact to digital platforms and online environments. The study employs a micro-level ethnomethodological approach, focusing on nonverbal tendencies observed in public settings, to elucidate how individuals construct and manage their social identities through communicative interactions. This research contributes to understanding the intricate relationship between nonverbal communication and the enactment of social identities by examining nonverbal behaviors across various social identities, including gender, national, religious, and class affiliations.

Keywords: nonverbal communication, social identity, body language, facial expressions

Introduction

Social identities are multifaceted constructs that individuals communicate through various nonverbal interactional cues. Nonverbal communication is crucial for self-expression, emotion conveyance, and social connection establishment. Nonverbal cues such as body language, facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice allow individuals to manifest their social identities in different contexts. Research has demonstrated the significance of nonverbal cues in social interactions, showing how dominance is exhibited in group conversations through nonverbal activity cues (Kumar et al., 2009). These cues encompass body postures, facial expressions, and voice dynamics, collectively contributing to the perception of dominance within group settings. Furthermore, nonverbal communication is associated with social cognition, where individuals interpret socially relevant stimuli (Walther et al., 2015). Nonverbal cues are pivotal in understanding and navigating social interactions, with individuals facing challenges in interpreting these cues in conditions such as schizophrenia (Walther et al., 2015; Chapellier et al., 2022).

Nonverbal cues are not only crucial for grasping social dynamics but also for forming impressions and building trust in interpersonal relationships. Computational models have been developed to predict trust levels between individuals based on nonverbal cues expressed during social interactions (Lee et al., 2013). These cues, including gestures, facial expressions, and vocal intonations, influence the perception of trustworthiness and rapport. In addition to face-to-face interactions, nonverbal communication extends to digital platforms and online environments. Studies have explored the role of nonverbal cues in online communication, such as emoticons and paralanguage in social media interactions (Park & Mimouni, 2020; Park et al., 2014). The digital age has introduced new avenues for expressing nonverbal behavior, impacting how individuals manage their identities and convey social information in virtual spaces (Montepare, 2014). Moreover, nonverbal behavior in video-mediated communication influences social attraction and affiliative behavior (Croes et al., 2018). Individuals convey a wealth of nonverbal information through video cues, affecting perceptions of similarity, trust, and social connections. Understanding and interpreting these nonverbal signals are essential for effective communication and relationship building in both face-to-face and virtual interactions.

The contribution of nonverbal communication to the enactment of social identities is undeniably significant, playing a crucial role in maintaining and representing subjective identities. The primary objective of this research is to explore the nonverbal interactions through which identity performance is carried out. Nonverbal cues serve as encoded messages, often expressed through physical appearance, vocal behaviors, body gestures, facial expressions, and spatial environment (Gyasi, 2015). In both the construction and reproduction of the social self, understanding the parameters of nonverbal communication is vitally important, as it functions as a reinforcing and sustaining component of social identities. Nonverbal communication, defined as “oral or non-oral messages expressed by means other than linguistic” (Adler, 2009), can be categorized into messages either intended by the sender or interpreted by the receiver as intended (Trenholm & Jensen, 2000). These message categories highlight the importance of perception and socially acceptable self-performance. One’s acknowledged social identity comprises a set of nonverbal codes that foster the intended identity, making the nonverbal decoding of messages as crucial as the encoding. Nonverbal communication encompasses the entirety of nonverbal stimuli generated by the source within specific contexts, suggesting coded messages for the receiver. As nonverbal signifiers, these messages both implicitly and explicitly convey the values that the subjective self intends to transmit. Furthermore, such conveyance in the communication process may originate from the source’s affiliation with a broader collective that possesses its own symbolic implications. In this context, the signified message represents a much wider community with which the source identifies.

At the core of this research lies the understanding that nonverbal cues express our identities and affiliations. Both self-conception and our intended perception by others are represented through specific physical markers, including body gestures, artifacts we carry, pitch and tone of voice, and the spatial boundaries we maintain. These identity configurations within the communication process create impressions of who we are, with varying degrees of control over these expressions. This research aims to explore various social and cultural identities, including gender, national, religious, class, and personal identities. A contrastive analysis of the components of nonverbal communication not only aids in understanding the nature of interactional conflicts, communicational uncertainties, and roadblocks to smoother communicative processes but also enhances our conception of the significant impact that social

and cultural constructions of identity have on communication. Studies similar to this illustrate how identity is manifested through interactions with others. It is through these interactions that identity is expressed, the public self is represented, and individuals come to exist as coherent and harmonious beings within their cultural context. In other words, the subtle and tacit mechanisms that constitute interactional relationships between individuals and groups are intrinsically linked to the identities that communicate. The formation and representation of identities cannot be perceived as separate from the stages of communication; they are interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

The methodology employed in this study involved a micro-level ethnomethodological approach, focusing on organized everyday situations through observations in public settings in Budapest, the capital city of Hungary. Although the emphasis is not primarily on fieldwork, the data gathered through participant observations provide a foundational basis for this review article. The observed participants exhibited a range of nonverbal markers aligned with their identities and public personas. This research examines how social interactions constitute a nonverbal order relevant to social identity by reflecting on and analyzing the everyday conditions within which they are formed. This research elucidates how nonverbal cues are employed in the process of identity management by contrastively studying and exemplifying how the self is constructed through communicative interactions. Finally, this research paper discusses collective and individual identities based on nonverbal compatibility with social group affiliations, analyzing the ways in which disparate identities merge. The research hypothesizes that kinesics, proxemics, and haptics are deeply influenced by one's social affiliations and identities. Thus, it is crucial to recognize that smooth nonverbal interaction can be achieved through understanding the obstacles and advantages posed by one's identity markers.

Methods

Micro-level observations were conducted in a public setting in Budapest, focusing on the nonverbal tendencies exhibited by individuals across various social identities. The observer spent several hours in both distant and immersed positions within the community under study. On-the-spot note-taking was employed, and the collected data was later analytically interpreted using relevant theoretical frameworks.

The observations primarily centered on nonverbal interactions, particularly through the use of haptics, proxemics, and kinesics. Conclusions were drawn regarding how class, race, religion, gender, and age identities employ different nonverbal signs pertinent to their social identities. Among the twenty individuals observed in the public setting, interactions with by-passers were also noted. Each participant utilized space, gestures, and touch in ways that distinctly reflected both their collective and personal identities. None of the nonverbal markers observed lacked sufficient demonstration of the nonverbal cues intrinsic to their respective social identities.

Findings

Nonverbal communication encompasses a range of behaviors including gestures, facial expressions, body language, eye contact, and proxemics, which vary significantly across different cultural and social identities. These nonverbal cues are not only fundamental in conveying messages but also in manifesting and reinforcing cultural identities and social positions. The intersectionality—the overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage—plays a critical role in the interpretation and use of nonverbal communication

cues. Nonverbal communication is deeply rooted in cultural norms and practices. For example, in many East Asian cultures, avoiding direct eye contact is a sign of respect and deference, particularly towards authority figures. Conversely, in Western cultures, maintaining eye contact is often interpreted as a sign of confidence and honesty. This cultural variation highlights how nonverbal cues can be misinterpreted when viewed through a different cultural lens. A Japanese employee might avoid eye contact with their Western manager as a sign of respect, but the manager might perceive this behavior as evasive or insincere.

Gender identities further intersect with cultural norms to shape nonverbal communication. Women, for example, are often socialized to exhibit more expressive facial expressions and use more affiliative nonverbal behaviors, such as smiling and nodding, compared to men. This gendered behavior can be observed in various social contexts. In a professional setting, a woman might smile more frequently to appear approachable and supportive, reinforcing traditional gender roles that emphasize nurturing and empathy. However, this same behavior might be interpreted as a lack of seriousness or authority in a male-dominated workplace. Ethnic identities also influence the use and interpretation of nonverbal communication. African American Vernacular English (AAVE), for instance, includes specific nonverbal components such as distinct facial expressions and hand gestures that are integral to its communicative style. These nonverbal elements are not merely add-ons but are central to the conveyance of meaning within the cultural context. An African American individual using AAVE might incorporate a "side-eye" to convey skepticism or disapproval, a nonverbal cue that might be overlooked or misinterpreted by those unfamiliar with this cultural practice.

Social class intersects with nonverbal communication in nuanced ways. Research has shown that individuals from higher socioeconomic backgrounds tend to exhibit more relaxed and open body language, while those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often display more closed and defensive postures. This can be attributed to the differing social experiences and levels of social power associated with each class. In an educational setting, a student from a higher socioeconomic background might confidently take up more physical space and make more eye contact with instructors, whereas a student from a lower socioeconomic background might exhibit more withdrawn and cautious body language, reflecting their different social conditioning. The intersectionality of nonverbal communication becomes particularly complex when multiple social identities intersect. Consider the experience of a Latina woman in a corporate setting. Her cultural background might emphasize collectivism and indirect communication, leading her to use more subtle nonverbal cues such as slight nods or minimal eye contact. Her gender identity might further influence her to smile and use more expressive gestures to appear approachable. However, within the predominantly individualistic and direct communication style of a corporate environment, these behaviors might be misinterpreted as submissive or lacking confidence.

When discussing identities that occur across cultures and societies, it is essential to provide a theoretical framework for understanding how social identities are formed and function. Social identity theory posits that an individual's perception and expression of self are closely linked to their participation in relevant social groups. Consequently, self-concept manifests through group affiliations and intergroup behaviors (Turner & Oakes, 1986: 237-252). This theory suggests that social structural elements impact not only individual behavior but also the manner in which these behaviors occur (Tajfel & Turner, 1979: 33-47). In exploring the contexts in which individual behaviors take place in nonverbal settings, self-concept becomes highly relevant in terms of an individual's self-perception. Group

memberships significantly determine the codes of nonverbal communication (Turner & Reynolds, 2001: 133-152). For instance, gender identity profoundly influences an individual's choices regarding appearance, nonverbal signs, and the elements of proxemics, haptics, and kinesics. The socially constructed markers of femininity, masculinity, or androgynous features form a set of nonverbal codes that convey specific messages pertinent to the communicator's gender expression.

Age identity, such as being elderly or young, also suggests distinct behavioral expressions in nonverbal interactions. Age attributes divergent nonverbal signs, and decoding these messages can be based on one's age identity. Similarly, the behavioral expression of one's identity is vividly manifested through class and religious identities. The social class with which one identifies suggests a stratification in communication processes, meaning that the represented social stratum imposes behavioral restrictions on interactions. This phenomenon is evident in religious identities as well, where binary gender identities (man and woman) are subject to specific behavioral codes encouraged by religious affiliations. Proxemics and haptics become significant in opposite-sex interactions, maintaining social identity through the careful management of distance and touch. Moreover, personal identity, as a self-concept, has the potential to suggest a variety of nonverbal signs (Ennaji, 2005: 19-23). Within the Foucauldian understanding of subject and subjectivation, the subversion and resistance to identity normativities and conventionalities arise from the repetition of acts. Repetitive acts of a particular identity carry the possibility of destabilizing and transforming that identity.

Nonverbal communication intricately intertwines with social identities, serving as a nuanced channel through which individuals express and negotiate their affiliations within diverse group contexts. Social identities encompass facets such as gender, religion, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, influencing how individuals behave and perceive themselves within societal frameworks. For example, cultural norms dictate specific hand gestures, eye contact patterns, and spatial distances that convey respect, authority, or affiliation within different cultural groups (Matsumoto, 2006).

Hierarchical structures within social groups also play a significant role in shaping nonverbal communication. Leaders and subordinates often display distinct nonverbal cues to assert their roles and maintain hierarchical order. This phenomenon is evident in organizational settings where executives may use expansive gestures and maintain greater personal space, contrasting with subordinates who adopt more deferential postures and subdued gestures (Goman, 2008). Religious and political affiliations provide compelling examples of how nonverbal communication reflects group identities and reinforces communal bonds. Ritualistic movements and gestures in religious ceremonies symbolize submission or reverence, while political gatherings feature supporters using specific signs and attire to express allegiance to their ideological groups (Hall, 1973).

Micro-scale observational research methodologies offer insights into how individuals strategically employ nonverbal cues to manage their identities. By analyzing participants' behaviors in naturalistic settings, researchers discern subtle cues that signify affiliation to social groups, reflecting nuances in posture, gaze, and interaction patterns (Goffman, 1959). It is imperative to comprehend that the social identities examined in this research represent broader collectives in which individual members are anticipated to act based on collective identities. For example, an individual with a specific gender identity demonstrates particular nonverbal behaviors during communication processes, with these behaviors symbolizing and reflecting the individual's collective identity. Given the significant role of hierarchical structuring in

human groups, identities within such hierarchical positions exhibit nonverbal markers that conform to the implicit coercive expectations of the community. Consequently, group members, even within the same affiliation, are encouraged to display distinct nonverbal behaviors that reflect in-group symbolism.

A notable example can be drawn from religious and political communities, where affiliated individuals perform encoded nonverbal signs, guiding the receiver toward a preferred reading, akin to Stuart Hall's concept of reception. In essence, social identity and its categorization profoundly influence communication functions, particularly nonverbal communication, which is directly impacted by the cognitive and motivational elements nurtured by the group (Chen & Bargh, 1997, pp. 541-560). Socially constructed categories lead to often unconscious associations of stereotypical expectations, ultimately affecting individuals' behavioral attributions during interactions. Prejudices and behavioral tendencies towards stable interpretations of nonverbal signs are predominantly driven by in-group nonverbal cultural codes (Manusov & Patterson, 2006, pp. 481-500). Methodologically, this micro-scale observational research revealed that nearly all participants exhibited identity cues through nonverbal signs relevant to their identity management. Among the participants, those demonstrating religious and class identities through nonverbal communication displayed higher levels of affiliation to a collective group. For instance, the nonverbal posture of a young priest observed in a public setting indicated that the interaction process was significantly constrained by the expectations and definitions established by their broader group affiliation.

Issues related to social hierarchy significantly influence how individuals are perceived and represented in their interactions. While dominant codes of conduct inevitably shape social interactions, the power dynamics within social strata manifest prominently in communication behaviors, particularly through nonverbal cues directed towards individuals perceived to occupy different social positions. This phenomenon is evident in both class and religious identities, where hierarchical positioning within specific groups gives rise to subtle yet distinct nonverbal communication channels unique to each group. Members of these groups adhere to established nonverbal codes (Hall, Coats, Smith, 2005: 898-924). Judith Hall suggests that individuals of higher social status often exhibit more explicit and expressive nonverbal behaviors, such as larger facial expressions and open body postures (Hall, Coats, Smith, 2005: 898-924). For instance, during observations for this research, two male participants in business attire greeted each other with vigorous handshakes and expansive expressions, projecting confidence and assertiveness. Similar assertive expressiveness was noted in another participant who used exaggerated gestures and paralanguage while speaking on a mobile phone. While there may be exceptions, it is commonly perceived that individuals of higher socioeconomic status tend to display more confident use of nonverbal signals.

Overall, whether stemming from financial and occupational success or other factors, higher-status individuals exhibit a greater degree of independence in their use of gestures and paralanguage compared to those who perceive themselves as more dependent on their surroundings and thus more restrained in their nonverbal expressions. Conversely, a security guard observed in the study avoided hand gestures when allowing entry to white-collar employees, opting instead for a modest head nod as a greeting. However, when interacting with a well-dressed business person perceived to hold a higher position within the company, both individuals exhibited different sets of nonverbal behaviors. The security guard continued with his modest head nod, while the business person extended his arm to pat the guard's back, signaling a non-condescending greeting indicative of their respective social positions.

E. T. Hall proposed that racial differences should be carefully considered in the study of nonverbal communication, suggesting that black culture, in comparison to white culture, exhibits a more intimate and sensorially engaged orientation. According to 'The Sage Handbook of Nonverbal Communication' (2006), white men in the United States historically held higher status and social power than black men and women. Cultural influences play a crucial role in shaping nonverbal communication among racial identities, often reflecting divergent communication codes stemming from either oppression or cultural assertion (Halberstadt, 1985: 227-266). Studies on spatial behavior, visual contact, and touch indicate distinct nonverbal behaviors between minority and majority group members. The oppression hypothesis (Henly, 1977) suggests that chronic stigmatization of minority groups leads to systematic nonverbal behaviors that differ from those of dominant groups. For instance, black individuals may avoid eye contact with white individuals, and nonverbal cues like haptics and kinesics may be influenced by resistance and avoidance strategies (Ashburn-Nardo, Knowles, Monteith, 2003: 61-87).

Observations reveal significant differences in nonverbal behaviors, such as eye contact, between individuals of different racial backgrounds, such as black and white. While these observations do not offer a definitive understanding of intergroup interactions, instances of African participants greeting each other with congenial eye contact suggest a performance of racial identity through shared cultural markers. In contrast, interactions between white participants often exhibit less expressive gestures and greater spatial distance. Moreover, notable disparities in nonverbal communication also emerge between male and female individuals. Female participants tend to use more expressive facial gestures and engage in more intimate interactions compared to male participants. Although African male participants demonstrate more intimate nonverbal interactions than their white counterparts, the use of nonverbal signs by females stands out as particularly explicit, intimate, and expressive. Specifically, haptic behaviors play a significant role in signaling sexual identity performance. For instance, participants presumed to identify as gay (based on local cultural norms of effeminacy) display more intimate and expressive use of space, hand gestures, and touch compared to presumed straight male participants, particularly in public settings.

Age identity is crucial for understanding proxemics, as Halberstadt's review suggests that black children maintain closer interpersonal distances compared to white children (Halberstadt, 1985: 227-266). Observations of elderly participants indicate that older individuals employ kinesics with greater mindfulness and care than younger counterparts, emphasizing the significance of space and touch in their identity management, where violations are viewed as disrespectful. Religious identity also shapes unique nonverbal codes, particularly in spatial use influenced by hierarchical structures and power dynamics within religious groups. Cultural capital, as Bourdieu proposed (1986), manifests through symbolic and material means in nonverbal messages. For instance, female religious participants tend to exhibit less explicit nonverbal interactions, avoiding eye contact and touch with the opposite sex. A Muslim woman observed in the study illustrated this by engaging with a local vendor without making eye contact or using expressive hand gestures. Similarly, religious male participants often maintain greater interpersonal distance with women and limit their kinesic gestures to avoid societal scrutiny.

Edward T. Hall's contributions to nonverbal communication highlight intimate, personal, social, and public levels of distance correlated with social identity, shaping and restricting individuals' identity performances (Hall, 1988: 91). For instance, Middle Eastern cultures, influenced by national and religious identities such as Islamic norms, value close

interpersonal interactions as symbols of fraternity and unity, contrasting with Northern European norms. In some Oriental cultures, intimate interactions among men, such as holding hands, may be socially condemned as homosexual behavior, whereas among same-sex Middle Eastern individuals, interactions are often more intimate and warm.

Individuals whose personal identities defy categorization within traditional social identities often adapt their proxemic behaviors flexibly based on situational contexts. Their perception of proxemics tends to be more adaptable compared to those rooted in class or religious identities (Hall, 1988: 91).

Eye contact serves as a significant indicator of identity in nonverbal interactions, influenced by cultural and religious identities which impose specific norms regarding its usage. In high-context cultures like Korea, eye contact is crucial and is encapsulated in the term "nunchi," denoting communication through eyes. Conversely, low-context cultures such as Germany value prolonged eye contact as a sign of honesty. Similar dynamics are observed in Arabic cultures, although extended eye contact with elders is considered impolite in Asian and African cultures. Within religious identities, Islamic norms dictate distinct nonverbal interaction codes, particularly for binary gender identities. Muslim women, for instance, avoid intimate distance, eye contact with men, ostentatious body language, and exaggerated paralanguage to maintain modesty in their interactions (Nees, 2000: 93). Conversely, haptic behaviors, such as touch, hold greater significance in Southern European, Latin American, and Middle Eastern countries across personal and class identities.

Hierarchy plays a pivotal role in identity performance through nonverbal communication. In countries like India and Turkey, behaviors such as crossing legs or failing to make respectful gestures towards elders are viewed as highly disrespectful in conservative subcultures. Gender identity also influences nonverbal behaviors, where exaggerated paralanguage and kinesics are frowned upon in more traditional settings that emphasize female modesty influenced by monotheistic religions (Park, Streamer, Huang, Galinsky, 2013: 965-971). Ray Birdwhistell's observations underline the structured nature of bodily movements in nonverbal communication, where behaviors convey encoded messages reflective of social identities. Different social groups construct unique identities, prompting members to adopt corresponding nonverbal gestures and paralanguage. These group-specific gestures clash during intergroup interactions, reflecting divergent identities and behavioral expectations (Birdwhistell, 1952).

Nonverbal gestures thus serve as a foundational element sustaining identities, whereby individuals unconsciously perform behaviors aligned with their societal or group norms. Deviations from expected behavioral codes can lead to anxiety and communication breakdowns, underscoring the importance of understanding and respecting cultural and social identities in nonverbal interactions (Burgoon, Guerrero, Floyd, 2011). Expectations regarding nonverbal behavior are shaped by individuals' perceptions of each other's identities, highlighting how identities fundamentally influence the dynamics and outcomes of nonverbal interactions.

Concluding Remarks

The profound influence of norms and values on the formation and expression of social identities constitutes a critical aspect in the analysis of nonverbal interactions. Within the constraints of identity, nonverbal cues serve as crucial tools for upholding and transmitting social norms. Group behaviors that conform to norms significantly shape how nonverbal signs are perceived and represented, thereby playing a pivotal role in the dynamic between identity and communication. For instance, elements such as clothing, hairstyle, and cosmetics are

indicative of social strata and serve as reflections of self-image and identity. Thus, individuals communicate their identities by attributing specific meanings to their physical appearance, with nonverbal signals serving as manifestations of self-concept and desired perceptions by others.

Similarly, cultural norms and values within social groups influence nonverbal aspects such as touch, personal space, and gestures, delineating boundaries between public and private spheres of interaction. This bidirectional relationship underscores how the body adopts and communicates nonverbal cues to convey meaning, influenced by societal preferences in identity construction. The body thus undergoes a continual process of construction, where ideologies and psychological knowledge manifest physically, turning the body into a vessel for unseen forces that inhabit human existence. This process of bodily becoming is shaped by discursive power, wherein nonverbal encoding of meaning assumes paramount importance. Gender identity exemplifies this process, where the body's repetitive performance reinforces its composition through nonverbal components as signifiers of intended meanings in social interactions. Kinesics, or the study of body movement, is crucial in illustrating how bodily expressions become confined by ideological constructs of identity. Hence, nonverbal encoding emerges as an efficient and rapid means to project self-image and affiliation with social groups.

Moreover, racial and ethnic identities, steeped in complex historical contexts, develop intra-group codes that dictate the portrayal of group image and concepts. Similarly, identities linked to gender, age, class, and religion are shaped by deliberate management of impressions and meticulous guidance of appearance and demeanor. These dynamics underscore the ongoing exploration of self-identity within the framework of Western individualism. The constitution and expression of social identities through nonverbal interactions are intricately intertwined with cultural norms and values, influencing how individuals present and perceive themselves within social contexts.

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