

Impression Management in Televised Debates: The Effect of Background Nonverbal Behavior on Audience Perceptions of Debaters' Likeability

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This study examined whether a debater's background nonverbal behavior affected audience perceptions of her and her opponent's likeability. Students watched one of four versions of a televised debate. In each, while the speaking debater appeared on the main screen, subscreens displayed her opponent's background nonverbal behavior. In one version, the nonspeaking debater displayed a neutral expression, whereas in the others she displayed occasional disagreement, nearly constant disagreement, or both agreement and disagreement. After viewing the debates, students rated the debaters' likeability. Analysis indicated that background behavior influenced perceptions of the nonverbal communicator but not of the speaking debater.

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Impression management theory (see Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980) argues that people try to control their communicative behaviors to create desired images of

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themselves. Although most research has focused on such self-presentation, people do more than manage impressions of themselves; they attempt to control images of others as well (Seiter, 1999). Professors, for example, might write glowing letters recommending their students for jobs, or matchmakers might highlight the positive characteristics of one potential mate to another. Such attempts at impression management are not always so positive, however. In political contexts, candidates might portray their opponents as foolish or immoral. Indeed, previous research has examined politicians' use of negative strategies such as name-calling, mudslinging, and character attacks (Blankenship, 1990; Dinzes, Cozzens, & Manross, 1994; Gordon, Shafie, & Crigler, 2003).

Although most research on such political tactics has focused on what candidates say during campaigns, opportunities to manage impressions of self and others are not confined to verbal communication. To be sure, the emergence of a visually oriented public (see Postman, 1986) in North American culture during the mid- to late 20th century encourages candidates to participate in televised events. Because television is a medium of visual images, it highlights nonverbal behaviors, which have a strong effect on perceptions of a candidate's image (see Pfau & Kang, 1991).

In addition, visual media affords candidates an opportunity to use nonverbal communication to enhance and supplement their verbal arguments. For example, time limitations imposed by formal debate rules means that televised arguers will not always have a chance to respond to every point an opponent makes. It might seem, therefore, that debaters who cannot discredit an opponent's arguments verbally might have an advantage if they can do so nonverbally. This opportunity, however, is constrained by the risk that expressing disagreement nonverbally might result in damage to the debater's own image. This is an especially important consideration because research suggests that image factors, such as likeability, play a more significant role in how an audience evaluates a message (e.g., Roskos-Ewoldsen & Fazio, 1992).

There are at least two impression management risks in attempting to attack an opponent's argument using nonverbal behavior during the opponent's speech. First, turn-taking norms in North American culture, often made explicit in formal debates, generally suggest that only one person can hold the floor. Communicating (even nonverbally) while an opponent holds the floor might be interpreted as an interruption. To the extent that audience members perceive interruptions as inappropriate behavior, the debater who expresses nonverbal disagreement risks the negative impressions associated with violating turn-taking norms. Second, expressing nonverbal disagreement during an opponent's speaking turn might also violate politeness norms by communicating disrespect for the opponent. Goffman (1959) suggested that communicating disapproval and disrespect violate social guidelines for civil behavior in public.

Understanding the role of the nonverbal behavior of debaters during their opponents' speaking turns has become especially important in political contexts considering that, during the last decade, presidential debates have been telecast using split screens, providing viewers access to nonverbal cues they otherwise would not see (i.e., the cues of both speaker and the opponent in the background). As such,

debaters have been provided opportunities to influence their audiences even when they are not speaking. An examination of recent presidential debates suggests that candidates have not neglected such opportunities. To be sure, during the 1996, 2000, 2004, and 2008 presidential debates, candidates were observed and criticized for demonstrating such background nonverbal behavior as head shaking, personal space violations, pained facial expressions, and grimacing.

Considering the recent history of candidates' use of such nonverbal behavior, and the enormous costs, potential outcomes, and highly competitive nature of political campaigns, we examine the effects of using nonverbal behavior to discredit an opponent's arguments while attempting to create and maintain a favorable impression. Specifically, we investigate the effects of different types of background behavior (i.e., expressing nonverbal agreement and disagreement) on audience perceptions of debaters' likeability in televised debates.

Literature Review

Previous theoretical work (e.g., Burgoon & LePoire, 1993; Levine et al., 2000) suggests that, when norm violations are perceived negatively, those who violate norms are judged unfavorably. Consistent with this notion, empirical research indicates that norm-violating debaters (i.e., those who violate turn-taking rules and politeness norms by communicating nonverbally during an opponent's speech) are perceived negatively. In four studies, Seiter and his colleagues (Seiter, 1999; Seiter, 2001; Seiter, Abraham, & Nakagama, 1998; Seiter & Weger, 2005) asked students to watch one of four versions of a televised debate. One version had a single screen, showing only the speaking debater, whereas the other three versions included split-screen presentations in which the speaker's opponent was seen displaying constant, occasional, or no nonverbal disagreement with the speaker. A fifth study involved a live debate that included the same conditions, except for the one showing only a single debater (Seiter, Kinzer, & Weger, 2006). In all of these studies, background nonverbal disagreement led the audience to perceive the norm-violating communicator as generally less credible and less appropriate than the norm-following debater.

The previously mentioned studies also show that norm-violating behavior can influence audience perceptions of the interrupted debater. One study, for example, indicated that when the disagreement displayed by the norm-violating debater was constant, respondents rated the norm-following debater more favorably on measures of credibility (Seiter et al., 1998). Moderate nonverbal disagreement also enhanced ratings of the speaker's credibility relative to the other conditions (Seiter et al., 1998), unless the audience was suspicious of the speaker's truthfulness, in which case it deflated such ratings (Seiter, 2001). Finally, background nonverbal disagreement led to higher appropriateness ratings for the interrupted debater (Seiter & Weger, 2005).

Despite the contributions of these studies, past research in this area has neglected to examine an important dimension of impression management. Although speakers certainly seek to create an impression of high credibility and social approval (e.g., the perception of appropriateness) for themselves (see Leathers, 1997), previous studies

have not investigated the role of background nonverbal behavior on perceptions of debaters' likeability.

This is unfortunate for both theoretical and applied reasons. Specifically, alongside credibility, scholars identify likeability as the most important image sought by impression managers (Schlenker, 1980), and as one of the primary principles underlying effective social influence (Cialdini, 2001). For example, increased likeability predicts greater attitude change when a likeable versus unlikable source argues in his or her own self-interest (Stone, 1969), when the audience's liking of the source is accessible in memory (Roskos-Ewoldsen & Fazio, 1992), and when audience members are low in issue involvement (Chaiken, 1980). The importance of candidate likeability emerges as a specific image factor in both local (e.g., Oliver & Ha, 2007) and national elections (e.g., Miller & Shanks, 1996). For example, Wattenberg (2004) provided data from polls measuring candidate likeability, indicating that every winner of the popular vote in presidential elections since 1952, with the exception of 1960, was considered more likeable by those polled. Likeability, then, is an important source characteristic, especially for candidates for public office. Our first two hypotheses are based on previous research examining background nonverbal expressions of disagreement and perceptions of norm-violating debaters:

- H1: A nonspeaking debater will be perceived as significantly less likeable when displaying constant or moderate nonverbal disagreement during an opponent's speech than when displaying a neutral expression during the opponent's speech.*
- H2: A speaking debater will be perceived as significantly more likeable when the speaker's opponent displays constant or moderate nonverbal disagreement than when the speaker's opponent displays a neutral expression.*

Because previous research suggests that antagonistic background behavior is perceived as rude and inappropriate (Seiter & Weger, 2005), we wonder if such negative perceptions might be attenuated if the background behavior was not completely antagonistic. Specifically, a candidate who demonstrated both agreement and disagreement might be seen as fair-minded or simply reacting to what is being said rather than intentionally trying to attack the speaker (see Seiter & Weger, 2005). In addition, communicating agreement, in as much as it communicates approval of and respect for an opponent, might mitigate the damage done by engaging in impolite behavior (e.g., Brown & Levinson, 1978). Mixing expressions of agreement with expressions of disagreement might allow a debater the opportunity to discredit some of the opponent's arguments nonverbally while avoiding the damage to the debater's identity normally associated with communicating nonverbally during an opponent's speech. Given that possibility, we ask the following questions:

- RQ1: Will a nonspeaking debater be seen as more or less likeable when displaying both agreement and disagreement during an opponent's speech compared to when displaying only nonverbal disagreement?*

- RQ2: Will a nonspeaking debater be seen as more or less likeable when displaying both agreement and disagreement compared to when displaying a neutral expression?
- RQ3: Will a speaking debater be seen as more or less likeable when the speaker's opponent displays both agreement and disagreement compared to when displaying only nonverbal disagreement.
- RQ4: Will a speaking debater be seen as more or less likeable when the speaker's opponent displays both agreement and disagreement compared to when displaying a neutral expression?

Method

Participants

The participants for the study were 151 undergraduate students (70 men, 79 women, and two who failed to report their gender) recruited from introductory communication courses at a large Western university. The average age of the sample was 22, with a range of 18 to 36. Each student received credit for participating.

Stimulus Materials

Two female undergraduate students (both 21 years old), who received As in an argumentation course the previous semester, volunteered to be opponents in four versions of a videotaped debate. All four versions included the same 7-sec introduction clip showing both debaters seated at opposite sides of a rostrum and the same footage of both debaters speaking. The first debater argued for legislation requiring television stations to meet their educational responsibilities to children; her opponent argued against this plan.¹ Because we wanted to allow time for participants to watch the debate and fill out questionnaires, each debater spoke only once. Speaker 1's speech lasted 6 minutes, 47 seconds. Speaker 2's lasted 6 minutes, 59 seconds.

To provide views of both debaters simultaneously, this study used "pop-up" subscreens, showing the speaking debater in a full screen format while the nonspeaking opponent was shown on smaller subscreens that appeared in the lower left (Speaker 2) or lower right (Speaker 1) corner of the full screen. Both debaters appeared in subscreens while the other spoke, but when Speaker 2 appeared in the subscreen, she always displayed a neutral expression.²

In contrast, each version of the debate differed in the role afforded Speaker 1. In one version she displayed no background disagreement, in two versions she displayed different degrees of background disagreement, and in a final version she showed a combination of agreement and disagreement. In the disagreement conditions (i.e., Conditions 2 and 3), Speaker 1 expressed disagreement by engaging in silent behaviors such as shaking her head from left to right, rolling her eyes, smirking, and mouthing words (e.g., "What?" and "No?"). In the agreement plus disagreement condition,

agreement was indicated by having Speaker 1 nod her head. In all four conditions, subscreens showing Speaker 1 appeared five times during her opponent's speech (at about 35 seconds; 1 minute, 56 seconds; 2 minutes, 53 seconds; 5 minutes, 15 seconds; and 6 minutes, 33 seconds into the speech). In total, Speaker 1 appeared onscreen for an average of 36 sec (between 6–8 sec per segment) in Conditions 1, 2, and 4, whereas appearing for a total of 56 sec in Condition 3 (i.e., about 10–11 seconds per segment). In Condition 1, Speaker 1 displayed a neutral facial expression in all five segments. In Condition 2 (moderate disagreement), Speaker 1 displayed nonverbal disagreement while shown in the first two and last two subscreen segments and a neutral expression during the third appearance on the subscreen. In Condition 3 (constant disagreement), Speaker 1 displayed nonverbal disagreement in all five subscreens for nearly the entire duration of each subscreen segment. Because disagreement takes a bit longer to convey than neutrality, and because disagreement was expressed in each segment in this condition, Speaker 1 was displayed for about two to three extra seconds per subscreen segment.³ In Condition 4 (agreement plus disagreement), Speaker 1 displayed nonverbal disagreement in the first and last subscreens and nonverbal agreement in the second and fourth subscreens while remaining neutral in the third subscreen segment.

Procedures

Students selected one of four time periods to view a debate. Each debate version was randomly assigned to one of the four sessions. Each student viewed one of the four versions of the debate (no disagreement = 19 men, 17 women, and two who did not report gender; moderate disagreement = 18 men and 22 women; constant disagreement = 15 men and 25 women; agreement plus disagreement = 18 men and 15 women). Each debate version was projected in color onto a large screen (178 cm²). Students were told only that they would be watching and judging a short segment from a debate between two political opponents, but were not told the topic of the debate. After the debate, they completed a questionnaire containing the dependent measures, and then were thanked for participating.

Dependent Measure

The debaters' likeability was measured using an instrument previously validated by Reysen (2005). The scale is composed of 11 items on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) (e.g., "This person is friendly," "This person is likeable," etc.). Data from this study indicate the instrument to be a highly reliable measure of likeability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$ for Speaker 1 and $.92$ for Speaker 2).

Results

Our first hypothesis predicted that Speaker 1's display of nonverbal disagreement while her opponent was speaking would result in decreased perceptions of

Speaker 1's likeability. Following Rosenthal, Rosnow, and Rubin (2000), this prediction was tested by contrasting the "neutral expression" condition with a combination of the two "disagreement-only" conditions. The results supported the hypothesis, indicating that the audience perceived Speaker 1 as significantly more likable ($F_{\text{contrast}} = 15.69$, $p < .001$; $r_{\text{contrast}} = .31$) when displaying a neutral expression ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.11$) than when displaying nonverbal disagreement (moderate disagreement, $M = 4.17$, $SD = 1.29$; constant disagreement, $M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.11$).⁴

Our second hypothesis test followed the same procedure. Results of a contrast analysis indicated that the audience's perception of Speaker 2's likeability (i.e., the nonnorm-violating debater) was unchanged ($F_{\text{contrast}} = .127$, $p = .721$; $r_{\text{contrast}} = .03$) by Speaker 1's level of nonverbal disagreement (neutral expression, $M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.02$; moderate disagreement, $M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.39$; constant disagreement, $M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.02$). Thus, this hypothesis was not supported.⁵

Our first two research questions asked whether Speaker 1's display of both agreement and disagreement predicted audience's perceptions of her likeability relative to the other conditions in the study. In seeking an answer to the first question, we contrasted the two disagreement-only conditions (see previous means and standard deviations) with the agreement plus disagreement condition ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.22$). The results of the focused contrast suggest no statistically significant difference exists among the conditions ($F_{\text{contrast}} = .366$, $p = .775$; $r_{\text{contrast}} = .05$). We assessed the second research question by contrasting the neutral expression condition with the agreement plus disagreement condition. Results indicated that Speaker 1 (i.e., the norm-violating debater) was perceived to be significantly less likable ($F_{\text{contrast}} = 8.76$, $p = .004$; $r_{\text{contrast}} = .24$) when communicating both agreement and disagreement than when displaying a neutral expression during her opponent's speech.

Analysis of the third and fourth research questions repeated the procedures for the first and second research questions, except that perceptions of Speaker 2's likeability served as the dependent variable. The contrast analyses indicated that the audience's liking for Speaker 2 did not change ($F_{\text{contrast}} = .058$, $p = .772$; $r_{\text{contrast}} = .02$) when comparing the agreement plus disagreement ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.13$) condition to a combination of the disagreement conditions (see previous text for descriptive statistics), or when comparing the agreement plus disagreement condition to the neutral expression condition ($F_{\text{contrast}} = .001$, $p = .964$; $r_{\text{contrast}} = .00$).

Discussion

Seiter (1999, 2001) argued that impression management theory should be expanded to examine not only the attempts people make at controlling images of themselves, but also attempts made to control images of third parties. With that in mind, the purpose of this study was to examine the effects of background nonverbal behavior aimed at damaging a speaking opponent's image during a political debate. Our results indicated that such background behavior had no effect on perceptions of the speaking debater's likeability ratings. This suggests that, when judging a candidate's likeability, audiences rely on the candidate's own behavior, perhaps not

trusting the opinion of the nonspeaking opponent, who may be seen as biased. On the other hand, such behavior was associated with lower likeability ratings for the debater who was communicating nonverbally. This finding is consistent with previous theoretical work suggesting that norm violators are perceived suspiciously (e.g., Levine et al., 2000), and with research indicating that violations of turn-taking rules (i.e., verbal interruptions) are associated with negative consequences for the violator (Bennett, 1981; Chambliss & Feeny, 1992; LaFrance, 1992; Place & Becker, 1991; Robinson & Reis, 1989). Moreover, it is consistent with research on politeness theory suggesting that impolite behavior can negatively affect political candidates (Dailey, Hinck, & Hinck, 2008).

Our results, considered alongside findings from previous research, have applied significance for anyone who argues on television. Although this study used the context of a political debate, the results might apply to any kind of argumentation activity in which the nonspeaking debater is clearly visible to the audience. For instance, less structured debates between political adversaries has become a regular feature of many network television news programs. Town hall discussions and courtrooms also represent contexts in which our results may apply. For anyone who participates in these argumentation activities, this study, along with others (e.g., Seiter, 1999; Seiter & Weger, 2005), suggests debaters create a more positive impression when they avoid expressions of disagreement while their opponent is speaking and, instead, do not react at all. To be sure, this study suggests that the communicator in the background was perceived as most likeable when she displayed a neutral expression during her opponent's speech. In fact, *any* background nonverbal disagreement seemed to be viewed negatively, whether accompanied by agreement or not.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As with any laboratory research, there are limitations to this study. For example, due to practical considerations (e.g., time restraints, recruiting participants for the study), audience members only saw the first speeches for each debater. In real debates, audiences are exposed to candidates for longer periods of time, which could affect perceptions of likeability. Mere exposure theory, for instance, argues that more contact with a stimulus may be associated with more positive reactions to it (Zajonc, 1968). In a related concern, although longer lasting subscreens in the constant disagreement condition permitted us to include more nonverbal disagreement relative to the other conditions, it also gave Speaker 1 more "air time." Considering the predictions of mere exposure theory, such air time may have created a confound in this study that should be considered when interpreting our research. Given that our results are consistent with other studies, and that perceptions of speakers in the constant disagreement condition were negative, the effects of mere exposure seem to be negligible.

An additional issue is that, although, historically, televised debates have used split-screen formats, this study used pop-up subscreens for the reaction shots of the other candidate. Future research should correct for this limitation. Even so, although subscreens may not be the best choice as far as external validity, they do not

necessarily lead to ecologically invalid results. Indeed, if anything, the effect found using pop-up subscreens should be smaller than might be expected using split-screen formats, given that participants see less of the norm-violating debater in popups than in split-screen formats. In other words, this study might underestimate the real-world effect. In addition, because the television screen on which the participants viewed the debates was relatively large compared to typical television screens, the norm-violating behavior was clearly in view. Consequently, the subscreens probably did not prevent the norm violations from being perceived by the audience. Finally, the results of this study tend to confirm the overall negative effects of norm-violating, nonverbal behavior by other studies that do use split-screen shots, which generates evidence of the robustness of this effect.

Because only female debaters were judged and undergraduate college students were participants, the findings may not generalize to other situations. Previous theory and research, for instance, suggests that women are perceived more negatively than men when violating communication expectations (e.g., see M. Burgoon & Siegel, 2004; Klingle, 2004). However, because research examining perceptions of credibility and appropriateness found that male debaters were judged to be less appropriate (Seiter & Weger, 2005) and to be generally less credible (Seiter, 1999) when they engaged in high levels of nonverbal disagreement, we believe there is evidence to suggest that the results of this study are likely to generalize to men as well.

In addition to correcting for these limitations, future research should examine other issues related to nonverbal behavior in debates. For example, are there communication states and traits that might affect perceptions of such behavior? Perhaps individuals prone to communicating in destructive ways (e.g., verbally aggressive individuals) would view such background behavior less negatively than would other people. Moreover, perhaps people who are more likely to focus on the content of the debate rather than on peripheral cues (e.g., people with a high need for cognition or people who are highly involved in the topic) would be less influenced by such background behaviors. In addition, we wonder what the best strategy would be for speakers confronted with such background behaviors. For example, is it best to keep plugging along with one's speech, ignoring the behavior of one's opponent, or is there something one can say or do to be perceived even more favorably? Finally, future research should include a condition in which the debater in the background displays only agreement with the opponent. Such a condition might provide insight into whether the negative effects of background behavior observed in this and other studies is due to their nature as a violation of turn-taking rules or a violation of the positive politeness rule because agreement only could not be considered an "attack."

Notes

- [1] For a script of the debate, contact John S. Seiter.
- [2] In all versions of the debate, the second speaker's subscreens appeared four times during her opponent's speech (at 11 seconds; 1 minute, 55 seconds; 3 minutes, 40 seconds; and 5 minutes, 26 seconds) resulting in an average of 1 minutes, 21 seconds total time on subscreen appearances.

- [3] Longer lasting subscreens in the fourth (constant disagreement) condition permitted us to include more nonverbal disagreement relative to the other conditions. Doing this, however, created a limitation to the study that is addressed in the Discussion section.
- [4] The omnibus F test for likeability for Speaker 1 was $F(3, 147) = 6.55, p < .001, \eta^2 = .121$.
- [5] The omnibus F test for likeability for Speaker 2 was $F(3, 147) = 1.85, p = .906, \eta^2 = .004$. Here, we followed the suggestion by Rosenthal, Rosnow, and Rubin (2000) that contrast analyses should be conducted even in cases when the omnibus F test is not significant.

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