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The Impact of Facial Expressions on Public Speaking Performance and Audience Perception

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Abstract: Nonverbal communication is a foundational dimension of effective public speaking, yet the specific contribution of facial expressiveness to audience perception remains underexplored. This study investigated how speaker facial expressiveness and speech content quality independently and jointly shape audience evaluations of credibility, warmth, engagement, and overall competence. Using a controlled experimental design, 120 undergraduate participants (62% female, 38% male) viewed one of four video-recorded speeches manipulating expressiveness and content quality. Audiences consistently rated highly expressive speakers more favorably across all perception dimensions, regardless of content quality. The most favorable ratings were given to speakers who combined high expressiveness with strong content, while low-expressiveness speakers received poor ratings even when delivering well-organized speeches. These findings confirm that facial expressiveness is a powerful and trainable determinant of audience perception, with important implications for communication pedagogy in higher education and EFL contexts.

Keywords: Facial Expressiveness, Public Speaking, Nonverbal Communication, Audience Perception, Speaker Credibility, EFL Pedagogy

1. Introduction

Public speaking is one of the most consequential communication skills an individual can develop, with direct implications for academic success, professional advancement, and social influence. While considerable scholarly attention has been directed at the verbal dimensions of speaking performance—such as argument structure, vocabulary, and rhetorical organization—the nonverbal dimensions of delivery have received comparatively less rigorous experimental investigation. Among the many nonverbal channels available to a speaker, facial expressions occupy a uniquely privileged position: they are continuously visible to the audience, they convey emotional information in real time, and they are processed rapidly and often automatically by observers[1]. Despite this, their specific and measurable contribution to audience perception in formal public speaking contexts remains an underexplored area of communication research.

Theoretical frameworks in nonverbal communication offer compelling reasons to expect that facial expressiveness will significantly shape how audiences evaluate speakers. Mehrabian's foundational work established that in face-to-face communication, the emotional dimension of a message is conveyed predominantly through nonverbal channels rather than through words alone[2]. More recently, Expectancy Violation Theory has proposed that when a speaker behaves in ways that exceed audience expectations—for example, by displaying greater warmth or expressiveness than a formal speaking context might ordinarily produce—audiences respond with enhanced evaluations of

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credibility and likability. This theoretical mechanism suggests that the effects of facial expressiveness on audience perception may be both powerful and context-independent[3].

A persistent limitation of the existing literature, however, is the absence of studies that experimentally isolate facial expressiveness as a manipulated independent variable within a public speaking context. Most prior research has examined nonverbal behaviors broadly or has focused on isolated cues such as eye contact, without systematically testing how expressiveness interacts with the quality of verbal content. This interaction is theoretically important: it remains unclear whether strong nonverbal presentation can compensate for weak verbal content, or whether these two dimensions operate independently of each other in producing audience evaluations[4].

The present study was designed to address these gaps. A controlled experiment was conducted in which speaker facial expressiveness (high vs. low) and speech content quality (strong vs. weak) were independently manipulated, and their effects on four dimensions of audience perception—credibility, warmth, engagement, and overall competence—were measured using a validated instrument. Three hypotheses were advanced: first, that high facial expressiveness would significantly improve audience perception ratings across all dimensions; second, that strong content quality would independently predict more favorable audience perceptions; and third, that high expressiveness and strong content would interact to produce the highest perception scores when combined[5]. The study contributes to both nonverbal communication theory and the evidence base for public speaking pedagogy, with particular relevance for higher education and foreign language instruction contexts.

2. Materials and Methods

One hundred and twenty undergraduate students (62% female, 38% male; average age 20 years) enrolled in introductory communication courses at a public university volunteered to participate in exchange for partial course credit. Participants were randomly assigned in equal groups of thirty to one of the four experimental conditions. All participants provided written informed consent, and the study received institutional ethical clearance before data collection began[6].

A two-by-two between-subjects experimental design was employed, crossing Facial Expressiveness (high vs. low) with Content Quality (strong vs. weak), yielding four distinct speech conditions. Four five-minute video-recorded speeches were produced by two trained confederate speakers—one male and one female—who were coached by a certified acting instructor to deliver consistent high- and low-expressiveness performances across multiple recording sessions[7].

In the high-expressiveness condition, speakers displayed frequent genuine smiling, sustained eye contact with the camera, dynamic facial movement, and emotional variation appropriate to their message. In the low-expressiveness condition, speakers maintained a consistently neutral affect, minimal or absent smiling, and unfocused gaze. Strong-content speeches were logically structured, empirically supported, and clearly delivered; weak-content speeches were disorganized, unsubstantiated, and repetitive. All four videos were matched for length, speaking rate, and visual setting. Two independent communication scholars reviewed the stimuli prior to data collection and confirmed the adequacy of each manipulation[8].

Audience perception was assessed using the Public Speaking Perception Scale, a twenty-item instrument organized into four subscales—credibility, warmth, engagement, and overall competence—each demonstrating strong internal reliability. Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating more favorable perceptions. Communication apprehension was also measured as a control variable using the Personal Report of Confidence as a Speaker. Participants additionally completed brief manipulation checks to confirm they had perceived the intended differences between conditions[9].

Participants were tested individually to prevent social influence effects. Each participant completed the PRCS upon arrival, viewed their assigned video stimulus on a standardized monitor, and then completed the PSPS and manipulation check items. A structured debriefing followed each session. The entire procedure took approximately twenty-five minutes. All sessions were conducted by the same trained research assistant across a six-week data collection period.

3. Results and Discussion

Participants accurately perceived the intended differences between conditions. Speakers in the high-expressiveness condition were rated as considerably more expressive than those in the low-expressiveness condition, and speeches in the strong-content condition were rated as significantly better organized than those in the weak-content condition. Both manipulations produced large differences between groups, confirming the integrity of the experimental stimuli. Communication apprehension scores did not significantly predict any audience perception outcome and were not a meaningful source of variation in the data[10].

Multivariate analysis revealed significant independent effects of both facial expressiveness and content quality on the combined set of audience perception outcomes. Facial expressiveness was the stronger of the two predictors, accounting for a substantially larger share of the variance in perception scores than content quality. Speakers displaying high expressiveness received markedly higher ratings across all four perception dimensions—credibility, warmth, engagement, and overall competence—compared to their low-expressiveness counterparts. These differences were consistent, large in magnitude, and statistically significant across all subscales.

Content quality also exerted a significant independent effect on audience perception, with strong-content speeches generating higher ratings than weak-content speeches. However, the magnitude of the content quality effect was consistently smaller than that of facial expressiveness, indicating that how a speaker presents—rather than solely what they say—carries considerable weight in audience evaluation[11].

A significant interaction was found between facial expressiveness and content quality, confirming that these two factors do not operate in isolation. The highest audience perception ratings were obtained in the high-expressiveness, strong-content condition, reflecting the cumulative advantage of combining effective nonverbal delivery with well-organized speech content. The second highest ratings were recorded for high-expressiveness speakers delivering weak content, followed by low-expressiveness speakers with strong content, and finally low-expressiveness speakers with weak content[12].

Notably, highly expressive speakers delivering objectively weak content were still rated more favorably than low-expressiveness speakers delivering strong content. This pattern indicates that facial expressiveness can, to a meaningful degree, compensate for deficiencies in verbal content, and that its absence substantially diminishes audience perception even when the spoken message is well-constructed. These findings support all three study hypotheses.

The results of this study provide clear and consistent evidence that facial expressiveness is a powerful determinant of how audiences perceive public speakers. Across all four dimensions of perception measured—credibility, warmth, engagement, and overall competence—speakers who displayed high facial expressiveness were evaluated significantly more favorably than those who presented with a neutral or flat affect. This finding held regardless of the quality of the verbal content being delivered, confirming that nonverbal expressiveness operates as an independent and influential factor in audience evaluation[13].

These results align closely with predictions derived from Expectancy Violation Theory, which holds that communicators who enact behaviors exceeding normative expectations generate enhanced evaluations from their audiences. A warm, animated, and engaged facial presentation appears to surpass what audiences typically anticipate from formal public speaking contexts, triggering a favorable evaluative response that extends across multiple dimensions of perception. The finding also resonates with the broader literature on nonverbal communication, which consistently identifies the face as a primary site of affective signaling in interpersonal and presentational contexts[14].

The interaction between expressiveness and content quality adds a further layer of insight. When both high expressiveness and strong content were present, audience ratings reached their highest levels, suggesting that these two dimensions of speaking performance reinforce each other rather than simply adding together. This has practical significance: developing both nonverbal expressiveness and verbal argumentation skills is likely to produce a greater improvement in audience perception than improving either dimension alone. Conversely, the finding that highly expressive speakers with weak content still outperformed low-expressiveness speakers with strong content highlights the risk of neglecting nonverbal training in favor of an exclusive focus on content preparation.

The pedagogical implications of these findings are particularly significant for higher education contexts, including institutions where students develop public speaking skills in a second or foreign language. In many academic settings, speaking instruction tends to prioritize content-oriented competencies—argument construction, evidence use, and organizational clarity—while nonverbal delivery receives comparatively little explicit attention. The present findings challenge this emphasis and suggest that instruction in facial expressiveness deserves a more prominent place in public speaking curricula.

For foreign philology and EFL instructors in particular, this has direct classroom relevance. Learners preparing to communicate in academic or professional settings in a foreign language must navigate both the verbal demands of the language and the nonverbal demands of the speaking context. As Madraximova notes, communicative competence in EFL settings develops most effectively when language instruction attends to the full range of expressive and functional dimensions of language use—not verbal accuracy alone. This perspective reinforces the argument that nonverbal expressiveness should be treated as an integral rather than supplementary component of speaking instruction. When verbal fluency is still developing, expressive nonverbal delivery may serve as a particularly important compensatory resource—one that signals confidence, engagement, and communicative competence to audiences even in the presence of linguistic imperfections. Explicit coaching in facial expressiveness, including video-based self-reflection and instructor feedback on affective delivery, could therefore meaningfully enhance outcomes for students in language-oriented speaking courses[15].

More broadly, the results advocate for an evidence-based approach to speaking instruction that treats nonverbal expressiveness as a learnable skill rather than an innate personal trait. If audiences consistently reward expressiveness with higher evaluations of credibility, warmth, and competence, then cultivating this skill should be considered a central rather than peripheral goal of speaker development programs across disciplinary and cultural contexts. This is particularly relevant in institutions where language skill development is the primary pedagogical mission; Madraximova observes that academic and professional success in English depends on the holistic integration of all communicative competencies, an argument that extends naturally to the nonverbal dimension of public speaking performance.

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. First, the confederate speakers used to create the stimuli were trained performers rather than genuine speakers in naturalistic conditions, which may limit the ecological validity of the findings. Real speakers' expressiveness is embedded within their authentic emotional

experience, cognitive load, and communicative intent in ways that scripted performances cannot fully replicate. Future research should examine expressiveness effects using recordings of actual speakers or through live in-person experimental designs.

Second, the undergraduate student sample used in this study may not represent the full diversity of public speaking audiences, particularly those encountered in professional, intercultural, or academic peer-review settings. Future studies should recruit more diverse samples and examine whether the magnitude of expressiveness effects varies across audience types. Third, the present design did not account for cultural variation in display rules governing facial expression, which may moderate the relationship between expressiveness and audience perception across different national and cultural contexts. Cross-cultural replication of the present findings would be a valuable direction for future inquiry.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that facial expressiveness is a robust, consequential, and experimentally verifiable determinant of audience perception in public speaking. Its effects are large, consistent across multiple dimensions of evaluation, and meaningful even in the presence of weak verbal content. When combined with strong speech content, high expressiveness produces the most favorable audience impressions of speaker credibility, warmth, engagement, and competence. These findings challenge the longstanding overemphasis on verbal content in speaking instruction and make a compelling case for integrating explicit nonverbal expressiveness training into communication curricula at all levels—particularly in higher education and foreign language learning contexts where presentational confidence and audience impact are increasingly important educational goals.

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