

COMMUNICATING THROUGH TOUCH IN MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING

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Abstract: Body language and nonverbal communication in management and marketing have been studied extensively. However, the role of touch in business and negotiation has scarcely been tackled in literature. This study focuses on touch and touching, haptics, and haptic / tactile / touch communication in an attempt to assess its role in management and marketing communication. The study reviews the definitions of touch and haptics from a communicative perspective, the classification of forms of touch, and the variables of touching behaviour (age, cultural background, gender, status). A sub-chapter is dedicated to research on the role of touching in management and marketing.

Key words: touch, communication, haptics, management, marketing

INTRODUCTION

According to Givens (2002), if “seeing is believing”, “touching is knowing for sure”. Touch is critically involved “in sensory integration and, perhaps, even in psychological wellbeing: we humans need some degree of touching to survive and thrive” [8]. Moreover, “the touching involved in the grooming rituals of our prehuman ancestors may have been instrumental in developing conversation (in particular, gossip) and language” [8]. Touch is an important communication tool to convey comfort, encouragement, reassurance, support, and warmth. Compared to other means of communication, touch ranks third (6%), after sight (74%) and hearing (13%), but before smell and sound (3% each) [35]. Artifacts, colour, distance, fragrance, objects, odour, space, territory, time, and touch are environmental factors of nonverbal behaviour that communicate about feelings (e.g., touching the mouth frequently and unconsciously conveys weakness – cf. Halberstadt & Saitta, 1987) and relationships; smell, sound, taste, touch, and vision provide perceptual information; glance, smile, and touch reveal feelings about relationships [39]. Touch has been defined as a non-language message [23].

Touching accents and emphasises verbal messages [31]; can express five behavioural states [8]: deception (feigned liking gestures, nothing noticeable; touching of the face, hair, head, or neck – cf. Kudesia & Elfenbein, 2013); distress (hand-holding, self-touching); hostility (elbow, kick, punch, push); liking (caress, embrace, hand-holding, handshake, kiss, patting); respect (clothing, feet, hands, touching; allowing oneself to be touched); and anxiety [4]; “communicates distinct emotions (anger, disgust, embarrassment, envy, fear, gratitude, happiness, love, pride, sadness, surprise, sympathy)” [15,16,31], aroused and unpleasant intention (squeezing touch) and pleasant and relaxed emotional touch [17]; depends on high context [23] (Table x): in business, touching communicates messages in negotiation [12]; in education, instances of touch “are also coded as to whether they are attentional, friendly, helpful, or incidental” [13]; in food services, “waitpersons who lightly touch customers also receive higher tips” [11, 29]; in health services, professionals should not feel uneasy about having to enter a patient’s intimate space, “as they are almost certainly performing a vital social-therapeutic role with some customers” [8, 24]; therapeutic touch by nurses in nursing homes “has been associated with almost instantaneous calming in aged

persons, with decreases in pain and in sensory deprivation, and with increases in haemoglobin levels and in reality-orientation” [8]; touch can produce a non-verbal behaviour negative outcome: it can communicate power when physicians touch the patients’ bodies thus reinforcing the difference in status between them [23]; touch is used to promote healing in many of the healing arts [3]; goes “hand in hand” with the hands [12]; has become, in today’s workplace, rather a contentious issue, as it could sometimes be construed as sexual harassment; helps perform certain tasks such as cooperation [31]; is a matter of security / insecurity: in terms of security, secure behaviours – termed immediacy / involvement cues or positive involvement behaviour [9] (body orientation, close distance, gaze, lean, smiling, touch) – have been described as “actions that communicate availability, decrease psychological and/or physical distance, promote involvement in interactions, and signal warmth” [8]; there are three such attachments [26]: avoidant attachment was associated “with lower levels of gazing, smiling, and touching; preoccupied attachment was associated with lower levels of smiling and touching; secure attachment was associated with more emotional expressivity (e.g., higher levels of gazing, laughing, smiling, and touching)”]; in terms of insecurity [8]: “a person entering an open area may perform the barrier cross gesture (i.e., crossing the body in some way (moving an object from one hand to the other, scratching, touching the body or other hand), or they may hair-stroke, play with jewellery, or self-touch; adults may show insecurity by biting the arm of their glasses, their fingernails, or a pencil which may perform the same function; people tend to feel anxious if others invade this space; for example, by standing too close to or by touching others”]; is dangerous because it can be considered harassment and intimidation; it can cause serious emotional issues and legal issues; it invades a person’s intimate space; it may be perceived as unwanted or as breaking norms; “is related to personal space: people with lower space needs are more likely to use touch as a normal mode of communication, while people with higher space needs are likely to practise social touching less” [8]; it is studied by haptics [1]; it may display open physical affection (touchyfeely families) or not (families with less physical contact between members – backgrounds that tend to transfer themselves into future comfort zones [23] (Table 1).

Table 1.

Sensory involvement in high context and low context culture	
Sensory involvement	
Group	Individual
High: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “low personal space needs, • high-contact touch behaviour”. 	Low: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “high personal space needs; • low-contact touch behaviour”.

Haptics, defined as “the science concerned with the tactile sense”, “the study [of the sense] of touch” [37], “the scientific study of the sense of touch” and “The use of the sense of touch, especially in social interactions; the study of such activity” [36]: implies “both the type of touch as well as its frequency and intensity”; links gesture, posture and territory [personal space]; means “physical touch”, i.e., “how we like to be touched, what is an acceptable level or amount of touching, and what is culturally normal or acceptable touching” [23]. This dimension reveals much about human behaviour and it varies even within a culture [33].

Haptic / tactile / touch communication is defined as “the means by which people and other animals communicate via touching” [7,31].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The materials used in this study consist in books and articles on the role of body language and nonverbal communication in management and marketing published in the last 50 years. The keywords used to select the references are touch and touching, haptics, and haptic / tactile / touch communication. Browsing the references allowed the author to review the definitions of touch and haptics from a communicative perspective, to classify the forms of touch, and to identify the variables of touching behaviour (age, cultural background, gender, status) from a management and marketing perspective.

RESEARCH RESULTS

1. Classification

Touch can be usefully classified into five types [8; 8]: arousal / sexual, expressing sexual intent; friendship / warmth, expressing idiosyncratic (individual or peculiar) relationship; functional / professional (in workplaces), expressing task-orientation and regards handshaking and professional touchers such as dentists, doctors, hairdressers, manicurists, masseurs, nurses, physiotherapists, politicians (occasionally), and priests; intimacy / love, expressing emotional attachment; polite / social (in workplaces), expressing ritual interaction.

There are two types of communicating through touch [18]: adaptor gestures or adaptors (communicatively non-intended): body-focused movements, contact acts, expressive movements, manipulative gestures, self-manipulators, and self-touching gestures (fidgeting, rubbing, scratching, tapping, and touching oneself or an object) made when people are lying [25], when people are telling the truth [30], when people are thinking (i.e., processing information) [30], or when people need to “sedate” themselves [27]; and touching gestures (communicatively intended).

2. Variables of Touching Behaviour

The norms of behaviour may change according to age, cultural background, gender, status, etc.

2.1. Age. Children whose mothers display maternal warmth (gazing, touching) “develop a greater sense of internal control feelings that they can influence their surroundings and destiny, rather than feel powerless” [8]. “Patting a child’s head as an affectionate gesture” is common in Europe and North America [3]. Stressed children “will often suck a thumb (self-touching), which may conjure up for them the security they felt when being suckled on a real or artificial nipple, while adults show insecurity by biting the arm of their glasses, their fingernails, or a pencil which may perform the same function” [8].

2.2. Cultural Background. Touch is a basic human need; however, the manner in which individuals touch each other varies from culture to culture and within each culture. Like many other elements of nonverbal communication, touching behaviour largely depends on cultural background, i.e., “some cultures are much more openly physical than others” because touching implies intimacy and familiarity. Different cultures vary in the way the same touch is used and confusions can result if people are not aware of different cultural standards [2, 3].

There are very strict rules that govern who may touch whom and how in some cultures: “Arab peoples, Latin Americans, Russians, most South-East Asians and southern Europeans belong to high-contact cultures”, while “people of Anglo-Saxon origin, Scandinavians, Japanese, Koreans and Chinese belong to low-contact cultures” [8]; in Latin America or the Mediterranean area, “physical distance is very close and typical, and hugging, kissing, and touching business partners is quite typical” [3]; in Muslim cultures, “touch between persons of the opposite sex who are not related is inappropriate” [3]; in the U.S.A.,

“it is common for someone to pat a child’s head as an affectionate gesture” while, in some Asian cultures, “this might be considered inappropriate because they believe the head to be a sacred part of the body” [3]; Latin American, Mediterranean, and Middle Eastern cultures “employ much social touching in conversation (including embraces and hand-holding): these are called high-contact/touch cultures” [23]; North America and Northern Europe “employ touching only occasionally (handshakes and sporadic back slapping or shoulder touching)”: these are called medium-contact/touch cultures [23]; in Northern Asian cultures, meanwhile, “social touching is rarely used at all. But the geography is by no means that simple. People in the Asian nation of the Philippines, for example, use a large amount of social touching in conversation and personal interaction” [23].

Furthermore, “intercultural conflict can arise if norms about space and touch are not understood: if a British negotiator (high space needs, low touch norms) meets a Saudi Arabian negotiator (low space needs, high touch norms), the Saudi may advance ‘into’ the British person’s zone, and that person may step back; the Saudi may perceive this as coldness, or as a meaningless accident, and step forward again, and so on.” [8]. “When cultural taboos on touching are strong (for example, male-male touching in Australia or England), then some may try to compensate by seeking touch through sporting rituals, immersion in crowds or violence” [5].

2.3. Gender. Adult females touch others more than adult males [14, 20, 30, 39]; female students receive helpful touches (40%) and friendly touches (18%), while male students receive more friendly touches (29%) and fewer helpful touches (23%) than female students [13, 31]; female teachers touch female students more than male students [13]; “females are more likely to initiate touch in more serious and longer relationships, while in shorter and less serious relationships, males are more likely to initiate the touch” [28]; females are nonverbally more animated and warmer, i.e., they touch others more [9]; “females report less positive attitudes toward males’ touch than men do” [28]; “females that are anxious engage in high levels of avoidance and low levels of touch while, in males, comfort with closeness is related to high levels of touch” [26]; “females’ nonverbal responses to their partner’s touch varies depending on their attachment security, i.e., secure women respond by engaging in touching and kissing, whereas avoidant women tend to resist physical contact” [38]; “male students evaluated negatively by the teacher receive more negative nonverbal behaviour from them” (frowns, glares, head shakes, and restraining touches) [13]; “males and females’ patterns of touch initiation may vary as a function of both relationship stage and sex” [28]; males and females interpret touch very differently [28]; “males and females romantically interested in one another may engage in ‘grooming’ behaviour (subtly adjusting one’s appearance so that one looks better: e.g., adjusting and smoothing down clothing / collars / glasses / ties, touching the adornments / hair / jewellery” [8]; males and females that are married touch the most, while casual daters touch the least [32]; “males and females with a more secure attachment style tend to laugh more, smile more, stare more, and touch their partner more while together with their partner” [28]; “males are more likely to initiate touch during courtship and females are more likely to initiate touch after marriage” [36]; males regard opposite sex touching as pleasant, while females find it unpleasant until after marriage [21]; male to female touch is 21% reciprocated and 15% non-reciprocated and male to male touch is 6% reciprocated and 9% non-reciprocated, while female to male touch is 14% reciprocated and 13% non-reciprocated and female to female touch is 11% reciprocated and 11% non-reciprocated [22]; males with high Likelihood to Sexually Harass touch females more and behave in more sexual fashion toward them than low Likelihood to Sexually Harass males “when the training condition provides acceptable opportunities to do so” [40].

2.4. Status. Higher-status people initiate touch, while lower status people do not [31]; higher-status people touched by lower-status ones reciprocate touch more frequently indicating a reassertion of power [14, 34]; “high-power, high-prestige people (who are rarely closely approached or touched by subordinates) will often assert their power by invading the personal space of subordinates and by touching them”[8]; high-status people (State presidents like Bush Jr.) touch other presidents (Putin) or politicians (Berlusconi) to assert their power [6] – this is the so-called “touch privilege” [14; 17]; “high-status people touch, but are rarely touched by, their subordinates” [18]; “teachers (who have a functional role of higher status) interacting with students tend to occupy more direct space with their bodies and use gestures such as touching other’s possessions and pointing to intrude disproportionately upon the space of others” [19].

3. Touching in Management and Marketing

Touching in Management and Marketing is a matter of how people use their hands while working. Managers and marketers use them to touch themselves or objects and people. Self-touch is “the act of establishing physical contact with one’s clothing or body parts” [10]. People touch their bodies “when emotions run high to comfort, release, or relieve stress. Self-stimulating behaviours – holding an arm / wrist, massaging a hand, pinching / rubbing / scratching the skin, pulling one’s earlobe, self-clasping, touching one’s lips / mouth – increase with anxiety and may signal deception, disagreement, fear, or uncertainty”. Because they reveal insecurity / scepticism / uncertainty, self-touch cues should be avoided while establishing credibility with strangers (e.g., in sales).

The hand-behind-head gesture consists in holding, scratching, or touching the back of the neck with the opened palm. It is a sign of anger / conflict / disagreement / disliking / frustration / uncertainty. In interviewing, it points to an unresolved issue to be explored and verbalised [10]. The hands-on-hips position shows that the body is ready “to perform”, “to take charge of an activity, event or work assignment”, or “to take part in” [22]. It shows that the person is ready to carry out a superior’s order, to defend against those who overstep their bounds, or to discipline / threaten a subordinate [25]. Handshake expresses congratulations / contractual agreement / farewell / greeting [10] and liking [8]. It is widespread in business, diplomatic, and political circles [2, 4, 10]. “The palm-down gesture is a speaking or listening cue made with the fingers extended and the hand(s) rotate to a downward / pronated position” (e.g., on a conference table, to order “Quiet, please!”, or to warn senior staff “Starting today, I will not accept late reports.”). It shows assertiveness / confidence / dominance. Zhou & Zhang (2008) give a word of general advice: “when one negotiates in a certain language, it is generally advisable to use the nonverbal behaviour that goes with that particular language. This makes negotiation easier and better. The result is that one will be in a better position to strike a deal.” [41].

Martin (2012) examined “the effect of accidental interpersonal touch from a stranger (particularly a man) on consumer evaluations and shopping times and found that men and women who have been touched by another consumer when examining products report less willingness to pay, more negative brand evaluations, and negative product beliefs, and spend less time in-store than no touch counterparts” [24].

Peleckis & Peleckienė (2015) examined the importance of reading body language signals – accessories, clap, dance, distance between the communicators, dress, eye contact, eye signs, facial expressions, gestures, human posture, laughter, physiological responses (acute face / neck redness, sweating forehead / palms, paleness), smile, touch, voice intonation – in business negotiations and business meetings [27]. “Observing gestures, physical changes and postures can lead to a more or less realistic impression about one’s opponent (changes in) expectations / feelings / intentions / mood / thoughts. Body language signals in business meetings / negotiations are important because allow those who are able

to read nonverbal communication signs to determine more or less accurately whether oral language is true or not; they complement / reinforce / weaken the spoken language; and they reveal the other person's / opponent's emotional and physical state and evolution." [27]

CONCLUSIONS

From a management and marketing perspective, it is highly relevant to be knowledgeable and aware of haptics, including body language and meaning of bodily cues and signals. In particular, managers/marketers should be extremely careful when using communicating styles by means of touch, especially having in view the fact that people may have been subjected to various traumatic experiences and may not want to be touched at all. Furthermore, it is essential to note that the type and length of appropriate touching depends on cultural and intercultural aspects, family background, and a large variety of etiquette rules. Depending on the given context, touch might be seen as comforting, offensive or leading to a harassment lawsuit.

For this purpose, it is advisable to become skilled and "literate" in decoding this important intercultural type of language and to treat all aspects related to touch with great caution. The conclusion is that by acquiring knowledge and skills in body language/nonverbal communication, one can get a more or less realistic impression about one's management/marketing partner and to detect significant changes in their expectations/feelings/intentions/mood/thoughts, which may lead to (un)successful communication. The paper is an attempt to convince professionals that training soft skills is highly relevant in the contemporary world, where it is of prime importance to communicate properly both verbally and non-verbally in order to be successful.

Finally, from an intercultural point of view, the globalized world has brought in closer contact people from various cultures from around the world. This requires acquisition of cross-cultural intercultural competence to be able to address and understand differences between different cultures concerning haptics and non-verbal cues. For all these reasons, the place of nonverbal communication should not be underestimated in making business negotiations successful.

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