To Smile or Not to Smile: How Engendered Facial Cues affect Hiring Decisions

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Abstract : Past literature showed mixed findings on how smiling affects a person's chance of getting hired. On one hand, smiling suggests enthusiasm, cooperativeness, and enthusiasm, which can elicit positive impressions. On the other hand, smiling can suggest weaker professionalism or a filler to hide nervousness, which can lower a candidate's perceived competence. Emotion expressions can also be perceived differently depending on the person's gender and can activate certain gender stereotypes. Women especially face a double bind with respect to hiring decisions and smiling. Because women are socially expected to smile more, those who do not smile will be considered stereotype incongruent. This becomes a noisy signal to employers and may lower their chance of being hired. However, women's smiling as a formality may also be an obstacle. They are more likely to put on fake smiles; but if they do, they are also likely to be perceived as inauthentic and over-expressive. This paper sought to investigate how smiling affects hiring decisions, and whether this relationship is moderated by gender. In Study 1, participants were shown a series of smiling and emotionally neutral face images, incorporated into fabricated LinkedIn profiles. Participants were asked to rate how hireable they thought that candidate was. Results showed that participants rated smiling candidates as more hireable than nonsmiling candidates, and that there was no difference in gender. Moreover, individuals who did not study business were more biased in their perceptions than those who did. Since results showed a trending favoritism over female targets, in suspect of desirability bias, a second study was conducted to collect implicit measures behind the decision-making process. In Study 2, a mouse-tracking design was adopted to explore whether participants' implicit attitudes were different from their explicit responses on hiring. Participants asked to respond whether they would offer an interview to a candidate. Findings from Study 1 was replicated in that smiling candidates received more offers than neutral-faced candidates. Results also showed that female candidates received significantly more offers than male candidates but was associated with higher attractiveness ratings. There were no significant findings in reaction time or change of decisions. However, stronger hesitation was detected for responses made towards neutral targets when participants perceived the given position as masculine, implying a conscious attempt of making situational judgments (e.g., considering candidate's personality and job fit) to override automatic processing (evaluations based on attractiveness). Future studies would look at how these findings differ for positions which are stereotypically masculine (e.g., surgeons) and stereotypically feminine (e.g., kindergarten teachers). Current findings have strong implications for developing bias-free hiring policies in workplace, especially for organizations who maintain online/hybrid working arrangements in the post-pandemic era. This also bridges the literature gap between face perception and gender discrimination, highlighting how engendered facial cues can affect individual's career development and organization's success in diversity and inclusion.

Keywords : engendered facial cues, face perception, gender stereotypes, hiring decisions, smiling, workplace discrimination