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E-Screening: The Consequences of Using “Smileys” when E-Mailing Prospective Employers

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This study examines perceptions of applicants who use “smiley” emoticons. Using smileys evokes feminine stereotypes (e.g., warmth), which comes at a cost. When applying for male-gender-typed jobs, applicants using smileys are perceived to be lower in competence and agentic behaviors (e.g., independence). This reduces starting pay rates for applicants using smileys.

The Internet has prompted dramatic changes in the nature of personnel recruitment and selection. For example, the rise in broadband connections and video-hosting sites like YouTube has enabled applicants to submit video résumés to supplement their paper materials (Cullen, 2007). In addition, people’s online presence in the form of social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook now allows employers to check up on applicants outside of a work setting (Davison & Maraist, 2009). Even relatively mundane processes such as submitting a résumé have moved online, as applicants e-mail electronic copies of their materials to prospective employers rather than sending hard copies through the mail.

“The accidental résumé” is a term coined to describe the extra pieces of unofficial information the Internet allows prospective employers to glean when considering applicants for open positions (Davison & Maraist, 2009). For example, research by Tamanini (2007) has demonstrated that people perceive applicants with professional e-mail addresses (such as jsmith8888@) more favorably than those with

unprofessional e-mail addresses (such as HtoTHEhizzy03@). When outside evaluators are asked to rate applicants on criteria such as effort, personal responsibility, conscientiousness, and motivation, applicants with professional e-mail addresses fare better.

The purpose of the present study is to determine whether using “smiley” emoticons in e-mail correspondence during the application process influences perceptions of job applicants as well. It is not uncommon for people to use emoticons when corresponding with others via e-mail, yet little is known about how emoticons affect perceptions of the communicator. This study provides a contribution to the literature by illuminating the poorly understood effects of a commonplace practice. As described next, there are theoretical reasons to expect that smiley emoticons will affect how a job applicant is perceived and evaluated.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Past studies have shown that during face-to-face interactions, smiling is sometimes used as a communication tool (e.g., Kraut & Johnson,

1979) rather than an expression of happiness. Some authors maintain that smiling is actually more often a social display meant for others than a manifestation of underlying emotion (LaFrance, Hecht, & Paluck, 2003). Presumably, this is also the case during e-mail correspondence, where the use of smiley emoticons is a particularly conscious, deliberate action which may not necessarily correspond to an emotional state.

One characteristic that smiles connote during face-to-face communication is warmth. Indeed, past research attempting to manipulate warmth nonverbally has used smiling as a mechanism to do so, instructing confederates to engage in smiling to help convey a “warm” manner and refrain from smiling to help convey a “cold” demeanor (Ho & Mitchell, 1982). Extrapolating this to applicants’ online communications, we predict the following:

Hypothesis 1: Smiley emoticons will positively affect perceptions of an applicant’s warmth.

One advantage of online recruitment and selection is that it has the potential to filter out cues that can bias hiring decisions, such as an applicant’s gender, ethnicity, and attractiveness. A job-seeker’s gender may not always be clear from an application form or a piece of e-mail communication. This may occur, for example, when the applicant has a name (e.g., Alex, Pat) that is typically associated with both men and women. It may also occur with unfamiliar names that are associated with neither sex in particular. Unfamiliar names may be especially likely with an international applicant pool, given cross-cultural differences in names and naming conventions.

Even in the absence of a clearly male or female name, however, there could be nonvisual cues that clue employers in on an applicant’s gender. The use of smiley emoticons could be one such cue. Citing a variety of authors (e.g., Hall, 1984; Hall & Halberstadt, 1986), LaFrance et al. (2003) indicate that “one of the largest and most reliable findings of behavior research is that men smile less than women” (p. 306). This finding has been supported by various meta-analyses (e.g., Hall, 1984; LaFrance et al., 2003) conducted on face-to-face interpersonal behavior. Consequently, we expect that

applicants who use smiley emoticons in their e-mail correspondence will be presumed to be female when their gender is not otherwise indicated.

Hypothesis 2: Applicants who use smiley emoticons in their e-mail correspondence will be more likely to be presumed female than those who do not use smiley emoticons in their e-mail correspondence.

Conveying feminine qualities and attributes do not always work to an applicant’s advantage. The lack of fit model (Heilman, 1983, 1995, 2001) speaks to the consequences of a perceived lack of fit between stereotypically female qualities such as warmth and the agentic, instrumental “male” attributes and behaviors (e.g., independence, dominance) believed to be necessary for success at male-gender-typed jobs. The greater this perceived lack of fit, the more negative the expectations of an employee or applicant’s job performance (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008). In support of this theory, past research has shown that heightened association with the female gender stereotype prompts relatively unfavorable evaluations of people applying to male-gender-typed jobs. Heilman and Okimoto (2008) examined this issue with a study manipulating the parental status of male and female applicants for a male-gender-typed finance position. Results demonstrated a motherhood bias in evaluations. Expected deficits in maternal applicants’ agentic behaviors fueled negative competence expectations. Parenthood was concluded to be a liability for women but not men applying for male-oriented jobs because motherhood evokes the feminine stereotype. The authors stated that “it is the heightened association with gender stereotypes that occurs when women are mothers that produces performance expectations that predispose greater negativity to be directed at mothers than at nonmothers when career advancement decisions are made” (p. 196). By evoking the female stereotype, being a mother caused applicants in Heilman and Okimoto’s (2008) study to be viewed as less agentic and competent, resulting in negative evaluations.

As noted, smiling and warmth are associated with femininity. In accordance with the lack of fit model, we therefore expect smiley emoticons

to negatively affect evaluations of people applying to male-gender-typed jobs. Because they evoke feminine qualities or gender-stereotypic prescriptions:

Hypothesis 3: Smiley emoticons will negatively affect the perceived competence of an individual applying for a male-gender-typed job.

Hypothesis 4: Smiley emoticons will negatively affect the perceived agenticism of an individual applying for a male-gender-typed job.

As suggested above, agenticism is defined as stereotypically male attributes and behaviors such as dominance and independence (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008).

In accordance with the lack of fit model, the smiley’s anticipated influence on perceived competence and agenticism are in turn expected to adversely affect career-related outcomes, which is operationalized as starting pay rate in the current study. Thus, in the context of a male-gender-typed job opening, mediation is expected such that:

Hypotheses 5 and 6: The use of smiley emoticons will reduce an applicant’s starting rate of pay due to its effects on perceptions of the applicant’s competence (H5) and agenticism (H6).

Method

Participants

Participants were students ($N = 218$) at a large Southeastern university who volunteered to participate for course credit. Overall, 58% of the participants were women and 42% were men. The mean age of the sample was 19 ($SD = 1.61$). With regard to ethnicity, 72% of the sample was Caucasian, 13% was African-American, 8% was Asian, 3% was Hispanic, and approximately 4% reported another ethnicity.

Design

The independent variable, emoticon usage, had two levels: smiley absent, in which no smileys were used in a fictitious applicant’s e-mail correspondence ($N = 106$) and smiley present, in which smileys were included in a fictitious applicant’s e-mail correspondence ($N = 112$). Participants were randomly assigned to

review one of two application packets corresponding to these two experimental conditions. Dependent measures included perceived warmth, gender, competence, agenticism, and recommended starting rate of pay if hired.

Procedure

Each participant received a packet to review, which included a(n): (a) instruction sheet; (b) position description; (c) e-mail message; (d) résumé; and (e) questionnaire, as described below. All packets were identical with the exception of two smiley emoticons which were either included in or excluded from the applicant’s e-mail message depending on the experimental condition to which the participant was assigned.

Similar to the procedures used by Heilman and Okimoto (2008), participants began by reading an instruction sheet, which indicated the following:

This study is part of a program of research that has been designed to learn more about the selection process and, specifically, to gain insight into how impressions are formed of job applicants, how decisions are made to retain or eliminate them from the applicant pool, and if there are any decision rules or rules of thumb commonly used by decision makers.

The current study focuses on the impressions formed about individuals who have applied for an internship. We are particularly interested in decisions made on the basis of the minimal information most often on hand at the beginning of the selection process and in what information types yield the most consistent evaluations of a job applicant.

You will be asked (a) to review the materials of an applicant drawn from a larger applicant pool for an internship at a large company and (b) to give your impressions of the applicant and his or her likely job performance. Please read all of the materials in this packet

carefully. All applicants are currently in their junior or senior year at one of the universities where the hiring organization advertises paid internships for students. Names and other information that would identify the applicant and the hiring organization have been marked out to protect the anonymity of all involved.

Next, participants read a position description for a finance internship, followed by an e-mail message from a fictitious applicant. The e-mail message was worded as follows, with smileys either included or omitted depending on the condition to which the participant was assigned. A black marker was used so that no text in the areas marked out below was visible:

From: ~~Jamie Rogers~~
[mailto:~~jrogers0722@pdx.edu~~]
Sent: Monday, November 12, 2007
2:14 PM
To: ~~Ben Jenkins~~
Subject: Internship position #2981

~~Dear Mr. Jenkins,~~

It was nice to meet you at PSU's career fair last week. I was very excited to find out about the finance internship you have available and read through the position description immediately after we met :) I feel this internship is a great match for my interests and experience level and would like to be considered for the position.

I've attached my resume to this e-mail. I would very much appreciate the opportunity to interview for this internship. Thanks so much! Hope to hear from you soon :)

--~~Jamie M. Rogers~~

After reading this e-mail, participants reviewed the résumé supposedly belonging to the applicant. The résumé indicated a 3.3 grade point average and a major in business

administration with a specialization in finance. It also listed relevant coursework, leadership experience, volunteer experience, co-curricular activities, and computer skills.

Finally, participants completed a questionnaire which asked them to guess whether the applicant is male or female and rate the applicant's warmth, competence, and agenticism. Participants were also given a pay range and asked to recommend a starting rate of pay for the applicant, if hired.

Once participants completed this survey, we collected all of the materials in the packet described above. Next, participants were given a short demographic survey, which included a manipulation check and gathered the background information needed to document the characteristics of our study sample. After the demographic survey was completed and collected, participants were debriefed and dismissed

Measured Variables

Manipulation check. After collecting the applicant packets from participants, the following item was administered: “Did the applicant whose materials you reviewed use a “smiley” :) in his/her e-mail to the prospective employer?” Response options were “no” and “yes.”

Perceived warmth (3 items, $\alpha = .84$). Perceptions of the applicant's warmth were assessed with three items created for this study. Participants were asked to use a 1 (*very inaccurate*) to 5 (*very accurate*) scale to rate how accurately they thought each of the following adjectives probably described the applicant: kind, warm, and friendly. Responses to these three ratings were averaged. Therefore, scores could range from 1 to 5, with higher scores representing higher levels of perceived warmth.

Perceived gender (1 item). Participants were asked to “Please guess the applicant's gender.” Response options were “female” and “male.”

Anticipated competence (3 items, $\alpha = .92$). Expectations of the applicant's competence were assessed with three items obtained from Heilman and Okimoto (2008). Participants were asked to “Circle a number between 1 and 9 to evaluate the applicant's expected job

performance if hired to the position.” Three separate response scales were provided with the following anchors: competent/not competent, productive/not productive, and effective/ineffective. Ratings were reversed so that higher scores reflected greater degrees of perceived competence. Responses to these three ratings were averaged. Therefore, anticipated competence scores could range from 1 to 9.

Perceived agenticism (3 items, $\alpha = .80$). Expectations of the applicant’s agentic behavioral tendencies were assessed with three items obtained from Heilman and Okimoto (2008). Participants were asked to use a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*) scale to rate the following items: “If hired, this applicant will probably be a leader,” “If hired, this applicant will probably be the type of person to think independently,” and “This applicant will probably seek power in his or her career.” Responses to these three ratings were averaged. Therefore, scores could range from 1 to 9, with higher scores representing higher levels of perceived agenticism.

Recommended starting pay (1 item). To assess recommended starting pay, the following item was administered: “The starting pay for this finance internship ranges between \$8 and \$15, depending on the applicant’s qualifications. If this applicant is hired, how much do you feel he/she should be paid per hour when he/she begins the job? (fill in the blank) \$ _____ . per hour.”

Results

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations among the study variables are shown in Table 1. Analysis of the manipulation check variable indicated that the experimental manipulation was detected as intended. None of those in the “no smiley” control condition claimed to have seen a smiley in the applicant’s e-mail correspondence and 95% of those in the smiley condition correctly reported having seen one [$\chi^2(1) = 123.88, p < .001$].

Hypothesis 1 predicted that smiley emoticons would heighten perceptions of the applicant’s warmth. As shown in Table 2, an independent samples t-test supported this hypothesis. Incidentally, an exploratory follow-

up analysis indicated that this effect only held for applicants who were presumed to be female. Smiley usage interacted with perceived applicant gender such that presumably female applicants who used a smiley ($M = 4.42, SD = .44, N = 95$) were rated as significantly warmer than presumably female applicants who did not ($M = 4.09, SD = .63, N = 66$). However, presumably male applicants who used a smiley ($M = 3.81, SD = .84, N = 14$) were rated as no warmer than presumably male applicants who did not ($M = 3.93, SD = .46, N = 40$). This interaction was significant, $F(1, 211) = 5.33, p = .03$.

Overall, 62% of the participants in the control condition presumed the applicant was female whereas 87% of those in the smiley condition presumed the applicant was female. In support of Hypothesis 2, a chi-square test of independence confirmed that participants assigned to the smiley condition were significantly more likely to assume the applicant was a woman [$\chi^2(1) = 17.70, p < .001$].

Support for Hypotheses 3 and 4 was provided by the t-tests shown in Table 2. As expected, the use of smiley emoticons negatively affected perceptions of the applicant’s competence and agenticism.

Hypotheses 5 and 6 implied a mediated model wherein smileys were expected to adversely affect starting pay due to their influence on anticipated competence and agenticism. As shown in Table 2, the inclusion of smileys indeed caused participants to assign a lower starting rate of pay to the applicant. As outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986), four conditions must be present to demonstrate full mediation. For the models tested in this study, these conditions were: (a) smiley usage must predict anticipated competence and agenticism; (b) anticipated competence and agenticism must predict starting pay; (c) smiley usage must predict starting pay; (d) the effect of smiley usage on starting pay controlling for anticipated competence and agenticism must be zero. The significant correlations shown in Table 1 satisfied the first three conditions. Next, we computed the correlation between smiley usage and starting pay, controlling for anticipated competence. The resulting non-significant correlation ($r = -.124, df = 215, p = .07$, two-tailed) indicated support for Hypothesis 5.

Finally, we computed the correlation between smiley usage and starting pay, controlling for perceived agentism. The resulting non-significant correlation ($r = -.116$, $df = 215$, $p = .09$, two-tailed) indicated support for Hypothesis 6.

Discussion

The use of emoticons such as smileys is not uncommon during e-mail communication, yet little is known about the influence of this practice during personnel selection. As the first-ever study to examine the effects of emoticon usage in a job application context, this theory-driven investigation provides an important new contribution to the literature. Results supported the study hypotheses, which were based on the lack of fit model (Heilman, 1983, 1995, 2001). Using smileys evokes feminine stereotypes, such as warmth. Applicants using smileys are perceived to be less competent and lower in the agentic, instrumental “male” attributes and behaviors (e.g., independence, leadership) believed to be necessary for success at male-gender-typed jobs. Such perceptions in turn lead to a lower starting pay rate for applicants using smileys in their e-mail communication with prospective employers.

Limitations and Future Research

This study’s new discoveries should be interpreted in the context of several limitations and followed up with additional research. Consistent with past research (e.g., Heilman & Okimoto, 2008), our study sample was comprised of university students. The degree to which these results generalize to the judgments made by hiring managers, who are likely to be older than the participants in our study, remains unknown. One might speculate that cohort effects perhaps cause younger participants to be more “forgiving” of the use of smiley emoticons, suggesting that, if anything, the results of this study *underestimate* the smiley’s true effect on evaluations of applicants. Future research testing this proposition would be informative.

Next, it should be noted that smiley emoticons can take many forms, such as:

:) :-) =) :-D and ☺

We only tested the effect of the first smiley format above, raising questions about whether our results generalize to other smiley formats as well. Future research could test other formats and also examine the effects of other types of emoticons, such as the frown :(and the wink ;-).

Our sample consisted primarily of U.S. citizens due to the location where data collection took place. Meta-analytic findings have indicated that although every country shows women to smile more than men, there is wide variation among nationalities in how large this difference is (LaFrance et al., 2003). Replication of these results in other cultures would be informative.

It would also be interesting to examine whether there are other aspects of online communication (e.g., the use of emotion-laden exclamation points) which affect perceptions of applicants by evoking the female stereotype. Additional avenues for future research involve the smiley’s effect when the applicant’s gender (male/female) is known and the smiley’s effect when applicants are applying for female-gender typed jobs and/or jobs requiring positive affect.

Practical Implications

The most immediate practical implication of this study is for job applicants, who need to be aware of the benefits and risks of using smiley emoticons in professional communications – even relatively “informal” professional communications such as an e-mail message to an internship employer encountered at a job fair. E-mail is a lean communication medium, virtually stripped of nonverbal cues. At times, applicants may be inclined to insert emoticons – perhaps out of habit or perhaps to soften a message and avoid coming across as rude or curt. As suggested by this study, smileys can indeed have the desired effect on perceptions of warmth, which may be particularly important to women, who are said to place a priority on close, personal relationships (Myers, 2008). However, the practice of using smileys comes, quite literally, at a cost which can ultimately result in reduced rates of pay.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among the Study Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Condition (0=No Smiley, 1=Smiley)	1.51	0.50	–			
2. Perceived Warmth	4.19	0.58	.27**	–		
3. Anticipated Competence	7.47	1.42	-.13*	.12	–	
4. Perceived Agenticism	6.47	1.38	-.18**	.19**	.31**	–
5. Starting Pay	11.57	1.59	-.16*	.12	.37**	.30**

Notes. $N = 218$.

* $p \leq .05$ (2-tailed)

** $p \leq .01$ (2-tailed)

Table 2

Perceived Differences Between Applicants Who Did and Did Not Use Smileys

	No Smiley Control <i>N</i> = 106		Smiley <i>N</i> = 112		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2_p
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Perceived Warmth	4.03	0.58	4.35	0.54	-4.13	<.001	.073
Anticipated Competence	7.66	1.36	7.29	1.46	1.96	.05	.017
Perceived Agenticism	6.73	1.26	6.22	1.46	2.72	.01	.033
Starting Pay	11.83	1.69	11.31	1.46	2.42	.02	.026