



## Smile and its impacts on mood forming and purchase intentions in retail business

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the impact of employee smiles on consumer purchasing interest in shopping centers. Literature in the field of communication shows that facial expressions are a form of non-verbal communication that is very often used and is more trusted by communication partners than verbal communication. In the retail business, business owners always advise their employees to smile in front of customers to get a positive response from customers. We investigate whether a smiling employee can elicit customers' positive (negative) mood, which eventually influences their purchasing intention. To achieve the research objectives, this research used quantitative experimental methods. Theoretical and practical implications of the study are discussed in this paper.

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## INTRODUCTION

Humans are individuals and social beings who often interact and communicate with others. In this interaction, communication is needed that can be done verbally and non-verbally. Verbal communication is carried out with the explicit spoken and written language, while non-verbal communication is carried out with body language and voice intonation, including implicit facial expressions (Hasanat, 1996; Wang et al., 2020). In sending messages through the communication process, non-verbal communication is more widely used, and the level of trust in the trustworthiness of information is higher given non-verbal communication than verbal (Del Giacco et al., 2020; Kurniati, 2016). Thus, it can be said that non-verbal communication is considered more important than verbal communication in the communication process.

Non-verbal communication in the form of facial expressions is a smile. It is a universal display and cross-culturally understood as a symbol of fun and happiness. All cultures approve of a smile as a sign that someone is feeling happy just by looking at someone's facial expressions (Tsai et al., 2019). In addition, a smile also indicates that someone is friendly and willing to help others (Gabriel et al., 2015). In the retail business, a smile is significant where almost all retail entrepreneurs ask their employees to try to always smile in dealing with customers (Zhu et al., 2022). Previous research has proven that a smile increases consumer satisfaction and interest in returning and buying stakes (Ma & Wang, 2021). In Indonesia's retail industry, consumers are generally dissatisfied with

the performance of retail supermarket companies (Apriyanti & Puspita, 2019; Febrianto & Widiana, 2013). This indicates that retail companies in Indonesia still have problems in their operations, including the quality of communication with customers (Samadara & Fanggidae, 2021). Retail companies in Eastern Indonesia in particular, need to pay more attention to this regard because of the harsh nature of the community that it can affect communication patterns between employees and customers (Febrianto & Widiana, 2013).

Research on the impact of a smile on customer satisfaction and interest in revisiting has been done previously (Otterbring, 2017). However, studies investigating this relationship in the context of Eastern Indonesia, especially in Kupang City, have not been found in the literature. This is important because Kupang City as part of Eastern Indonesia has experienced quite good economic growth in the last few years before the pandemic (Fanggidae, 2019), thus inviting several large and small retail companies to operate in Kupang City. Indeed, the sustainability of this kind of retail company depends on many things, including the communication side between employees and visitors. Thus, the purpose of this study was to find out how the impact of employee smiles on customer satisfaction and customer return interest in retail stores. To achieve the objectives of this research, an experimental study was conducted with a quantitative approach.

Furthermore, the structure of this research is presented as follows. First, we conducted a literature review, especially on previous studies on smiles, customer satisfaction and interest in revisiting. Second, we describe the methods used in this study along with the employed data analysis techniques. Third, after analyzing the data, the results of this study are discussed and interpreted to answer the objectives of this study.

Smiling is an emotional expression produced by moving the muscles in the mouth and the eyes area (Torre et al., 2020). In evolutionary terms, a person with relatively small body size is a sign that the body's owner is not a threat. Therefore, pulling the lips, which results in a smile on the lower part of the face, is a sign of submission and non-threatening because the sound produced in a high pitch indicates a smaller body size (Ohala, 1980). Someone who smiles tries to communicate that the person is friendly and ready to help the other person (Gabriel et al., 2015). A smile contains various meanings or messages. Previous research has found that compared to people who don't smile, people who smile are perceived as happier, warmer, more cheerful, more successful, more relaxed, and more polite (Hasanat, 1996; Sturm et al., 2020). Other research shows that smiling people are seen as more submissive to others (Maher et al., 2021).

One of the characteristics of a smile is its ability to influence the psychological condition of other people who are communicating with it. Experts suggest that individuals can feel other people's emotions just by paying attention to the person's facial expressions (Kulczynski et al., 2016; Wolf, 2022). Even Woo and Chan (2020) argue that smiling can transmit emotional reactions to others. For example, a study by Sato et al. (2008) monitored facial electromyography activity when respondents observed videos or photos of individuals with happy or angry facial expressions. The results of this study revealed that those who observed happy facial expressions showed increased activity in the cheek muscles area. In contrast, those who observed angry facial expressions showed increased muscle activity in the eyebrow area. In other words, observers of happy people will also feel happy by showing a smiling face. Meanwhile, observers of angry people also feel angry by showing angry facial expressions.

A smile can shape the positive mood of the person who witnessed it. In a social experiment, Vrugt and Vet (2009) showed that participants who received a smile felt a more positive mood than those who observed a flat facial expression. Conversely, participants who saw a neutral or negative expression tended to feel a negative mood. This is in line with the facial-feedback theory (Coles et al., 2019; Coles et al., 2022; Tomkins, 2008), which states that facial expressions affect a person's emotions, both positive and negative emotions. Thus, the first hypothesis of this study is as follows:

**Hypothesis 1:** Compared to non-smiling employees, smiling employees can increase the positive mood of customers. In contrast, non-smiling employees increase the negative mood of customers compared to smiling employees.

A person's mood influences the person's decision-making process, including the decision to purchase a product. The decision to purchase this product is experienced by those who feel a positive mood or a negative mood consciously or not. Arguments regarding mood congruence as expressed by Cai et al. (2009), argue that people in a positive mood feel that their environment is kind to them. Therefore, they want to do something by shopping if they are in a shopping center. Meanwhile, those in a negative mood think their environment is not friendly to them, thus preventing them from shopping at the shopping center. This study's results align with the research conducted by Bae et al. (2019), who found that a positive mood encourages someone to buy a product. Factors that affect mood include the employee's mood, aroma, sound (music), temperature, color, and store lighting. All of these affect the mood formation of potential buyers, which in turn affects buying interest from consumers (Furnham & Milner, 2013; Karimi & Liu, 2020; Parsad et al., 2021).

Based on the background description above, the authors propose two hypotheses as presented below.

**Hypothesis 2:** Consumers who feel a positive mood tend to have a high interest in purchasing products. In contrast, consumers with negative moods tend to have low interest in buying products.

**Hypothesis 3 :** Indirectly, a smile affects purchasing interest as mediated by the consumer's mood, both positive and negative.

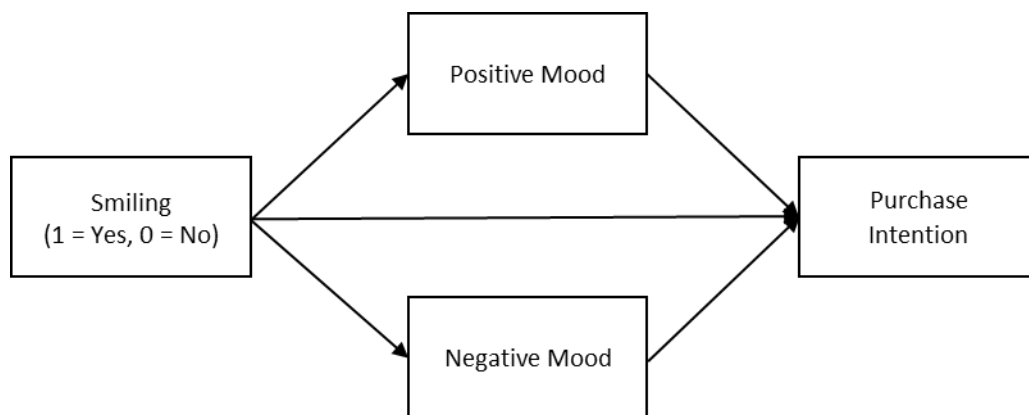


Figure 1. Research Model

## RESEARCH METHOD

The participants in this study are consumers of shopping centers in Kupang City, Indonesia. Respondents are obliged to meet several criteria, such as mature, willing without coercion to fill out the questionnaire and not knowing the hypothesis of this study. This is necessary so that the answers from respondents are not biased. The participants were not rewarded for filling out the questionnaire and were informed that they could stop filling out at any time if they felt uncomfortable.

The participants received an invitation to participate, including a URL link that would direct them to the survey page. They are free to accept or decline the invitation. The participants were informed that this scientific research aimed to discover their views on the shopping center's services.

Furthermore, the participants were randomly divided into two groups; each will receive the same URL link with a different treatment. Participants from both groups were asked to imagine a situation when they visited a shopping center in Kupang City. During their visit, they encountered a security guard who greeted them at the door. The first group was participants who saw a photo of

a security guard greeting them at the shopping center entrance with a smiling face. Meanwhile, the second group saw a picture of the same security officer with a non-smiling face. Furthermore, participants from both groups answered questions related to manipulation checks, mood measurements, and general buying interest.

### Measurement

The question items in the questionnaire were adapted from previous studies that have passed validation and reliability tests.

*Smile.* Smile is a categorical variable, with each category being 1 for smiling and 0 for not smiling.

*Manipulation check.* To ensure whether the manipulation worked, the participants were asked whether the photo of the security guard personnel was smiling or not. The question: "Is the security guard personnel smiling?" The available answers are dichotomous, namely: Yes and No.

*Mood.* This variable was measured by adapting previous research by Vrugt and Vet (2009). This variable is divided into two parts, namely, positive mood and negative mood. The question is: "How do you feel right now?" Participants rated their mood in eight words: happy, excited, enthusiastic, cheerful, uncomfortable, irritated, disappointed, and angry. The first four words are categorized in a positive mood, while the rests are in a negative mood. A Likert scale was used in answering these questions (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

*Purchase intention.* The purchase intention variable was adapted from previous research by Park et al. (2007). The two question items are "Most likely I will buy products in this shopping center."; "I'm going to buy something at the shopping mall today." A Likert scale was used in answering these questions (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

### Quantitative Analysis

Because this research is a quantitative study that aims to determine the relationship between one variable and another, the analytical tool used is Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Process Model 4 (5,000 resamples) software was used to simplify SEM calculations (Hayes, 2013). The analysis stages will be divided into early and advanced stages of analysis. Preliminary analysis is carried out to ensure that all measurement scales are valid and reliable, that the research model meets classical assumptions, and perform data cleaning. At the same time, further analysis is basically to test the hypotheses that have been built.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Measurement Model

Demographic characteristics of the respondents in this study are presented in Table 2 below.

**Table 2.** Demographic characteristics of the respondents

| Variable   | Description      | Frequency | %  |
|------------|------------------|-----------|----|
| Age        | 17-25            | 80        | 38 |
|            | 26-35            | 30        | 14 |
|            | 36-45            | 65        | 31 |
|            | >45              | 33        | 17 |
| Gender     | Male             | 71        | 34 |
|            | Female           | 137       | 66 |
| Education  | <High School     | 3         | 1  |
|            | High School      | 61        | 29 |
|            | Bachelor/Diploma | 112       | 55 |
|            | Postgraduate     | 32        | 15 |
| Occupation | Public Servant   | 39        | 19 |
|            | Private employee | 56        | 27 |
|            | Police/ Army     | 29        | 14 |

| Variable | Description  | Frequency | %  |
|----------|--------------|-----------|----|
|          | Entrepreneur | 48        | 23 |
|          | Students     | 23        | 11 |
|          | Unemployed   | 13        | 6  |

Manipulation check results were inspected to ensure the smiling manipulation worked. We found a significant relationship between smiles and manipulation check questions using a crosstab analysis. That is, when the security guard smiles, most participants acknowledge that he is smiling at the customers ( $X^2(1, N = 208) = 102, p < .001$ ).

Prior to hypotheses testing, the reliability and validity of all constructs are tested first. First, we examine the composite reliability and the Cronbach Alpha ( $\alpha$ ) value to test the reliability. Table 2 shows the results.

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistic

| Variable                | Loading | $\alpha$ | CR   | AVE  |
|-------------------------|---------|----------|------|------|
| Positive Mood (PM)      |         | 0.76     | 0.83 | 0.57 |
| PM1                     | 0.86    |          |      |      |
| PM2                     | 0.68    |          |      |      |
| PM3                     | 0.90    |          |      |      |
| PM4                     | 0.70    |          |      |      |
| Negative Mood (NM)      |         | 0.84     | 0.89 | 0.68 |
| NM1                     | 0.83    |          |      |      |
| NM2                     | 0.88    |          |      |      |
| NM3                     | 0.82    |          |      |      |
| NM4                     | 0.75    |          |      |      |
| Purchase Intention (PI) |         | 0.69     | 0.82 | 0.72 |
| PI1                     | 0.81    |          |      |      |
| PI2                     | 0.87    |          |      |      |

Table 1 shows that the values of Cronbach Alpha ( $\alpha$ ), composite reliability (CR), and outer loading are greater than those required. It appears that the Cronbach Alpha ( $\alpha$ ), composite reliability (CR), and outer loading values exceed the lower threshold of 0.70 as suggested (Hair et al., 2010). Thus, the variables in this study are considered reliable. In addition, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) value shown in Table 1 shows that the measurement items are valid because they are higher than 0.05 (Hair et al., 2010).

To test the hypotheses, the direct and indirect effects of smiles were tested on purchase intention. The visual display of the path coefficient can be seen in Figure 2. The technique used is to run a bootstrapping mediation analysis with 5,000 resamples. The analysis includes a parallel mediation where positive and negative moods serve as mediators in a link between smiling and purchase intention. In the first model, we examine the path of smiling  $\rightarrow$  positive mood  $\rightarrow$  purchase intention. It was found that smiling has a positive effect on positive mood ( $\beta = 0.32, p < 0.01$ ), which positively influenced purchase intention ( $\beta = 0.23, p < 0.05$ ). In the second model, the path of smiling  $\rightarrow$  negative mood  $\rightarrow$  purchase intention was inspected. Smiling was found to have a negative impact on negative mood ( $\beta = -0.38, p < 0.05$ ). Also, negative mood is correlated negatively with purchase intent ( $\beta = -0.18, p < 0.05$ ).

We found a similar result between the first and the second model, between the path of smiling  $\rightarrow$  positive mood  $\rightarrow$  purchase intention and smiling  $\rightarrow$  negative mood  $\rightarrow$  purchase intention. Although the direct effect of smiling on purchase intention was not significant ( $\beta = -0.07, p = 0.54$ ), the indirect relationship between smiling and purchase intention was significantly mediated both by positive mood ( $\beta = 0.09, CI = 0.02; CL = 0.18$ ), and negative mood ( $\beta = 0.07, CI = 0.01; CL = 0.15$ ).

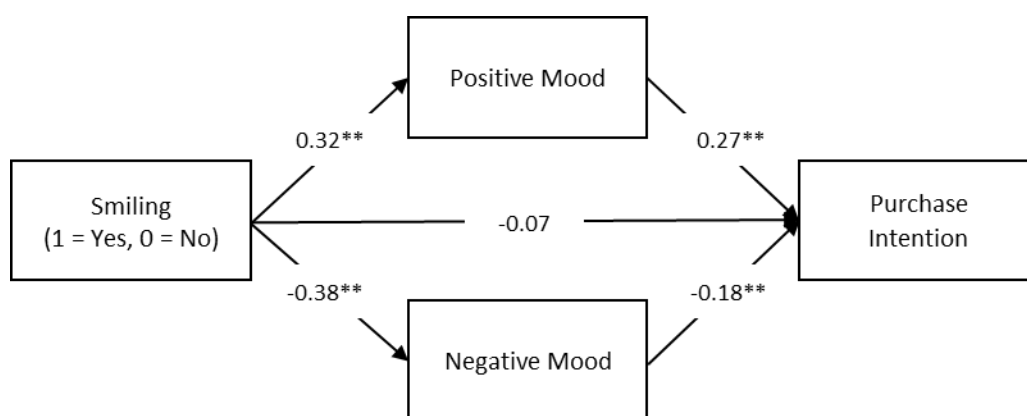


Figure 2. Hypotheses testing results

The results indicate several findings. Firstly, we found evidence to support the first hypothesis. The results establish that compared to the non-smiling employee, smiling-employee is able to increase the positive mood of customers. By contrast, the non-smiling employee managed to increase the negative mood of customers compared to the smiling one. Secondly, we support the second hypothesis by demonstrating that consumers who experience positive mood tend to have a high interest in purchasing products compared with those who feel the negative mood. Conversely, consumers with negative moods tend to be less interested in buying products than those with positive moods. Lastly, the relationship between smiling and purchase intention is mediated by both positive and negative moods.

Our findings are consistent with previous studies investigating the relationship between smiling and positive responses from the customer. For instance, Vrugt and Vet (2009) verified that a smiling employee could elicit customers positive mood compared with a non-smiling employee, which eventually increases the helpfulness of the customers. Weijun et al. (2020) also found similar results in an online service context. They suggest that e-service smile affects customer satisfaction. Other influencing factors are service quality and customer mood. Our study expands the prior findings in this area by examining the role of positive and negative moods as mediators in the link between smiling and purchase intention. This is novel because the connection between smiling and purchase intention is rarely investigated in consumer behavior.

The practical implications of this study are threefold. First, managers need to find a way to convince the employees regarding the importance of consistently smiling to customers. This could be challenging since smiling consistently is considered difficult, especially the type of smile that produces the most intended effect on consumers during the service delivery (Ngan & Yu, 2019). Second, although countless efforts have been conducted by service providers to encourage their employees to smile at customers, our findings suggest that a collaboration between two or more service providers in an area is needed. In our study, the facial expression of an employee working for a company (i.e., security provider) may affect purchase intention toward products in another company (i.e., a specific store). Lastly, we bring the importance of smiling employees to the context of a particular culture (i.e., eastern Indonesia), where smiling toward customers is considered essential in increasing customer satisfaction (Bessie, 2018).

## CONCLUSION

This study has several limitations. First, this is cross-sectional research where the results can only portray circumstances during the data collection. Future study can collect a time series data to resolve this issue. Second, purchase intention can be influenced by many other variables such as advertising, word of mouth, or pricing strategies. While our study did not include other variables as

determining factors, it is interesting to see whether the factors may overlap with facial expression in explicating the variations of purchase intentions. Future study can conduct such model.

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