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Nonverbal communication strategies in social media

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ABSTRACT

Nonverbal communication (NVC) has been present in human lives since the beginning of time. Regarded by many as the first form of communication, NVC was highlighted by Charles Darwin for its significance in the evolutionary trajectory of our species. Nonverbal communication accompanies social interactions across various social and cultural contexts, serving as an essential component of communication in virtual environments, particularly within the context of this work, in social media. This research aims to explore nonverbal communication within social media, unveiling its foundational concepts, intercultural dimensions, and specific applications in online environments. The exploration begins with an examination of nonverbal communication fundamental concepts and functions, elucidating the diverse channels and codes through which nonverbal information is encoded and decoded. The next section explores the intercultural considerations on nonverbal communication, delving into how sociocultural norms influence the perception and expression of nonverbal cues and emphasizing the importance of cultural sensitivity in intercultural communication. Finally, the nuances of nonverbal communication within social media platforms are investigated on the last through examination of visual communication techniques, branding strategies, and cross-cultural considerations, illustrating how individuals and organizations leverage nonverbal cues to convey messages, shape online identities, and engage diverse audiences. By elucidating its role in shaping online interactions, identity formation, and cross-cultural dynamics, this research enriches the understanding of nonverbal communication strategies in the digital age.

Keywords: nonverbal, communication, nonverbal cues, social media.

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Introduction

In the contemporary age, communication strategies have evolved significantly. As digital technologies have advanced, the dynamics of communication have drastically transformed, particularly with the rise of social media platforms. These platforms have become integral to personal and commercial communication, making the understanding of nonverbal communications (NVC) more important than ever. Brands, in particular, have begun to harness NVC to communicate their identity and values, enhancing their engagement with diverse audiences across cultural boundaries.

As society becomes increasingly digitalized, traditional face-to-face interactions have been progressively supplemented – and in some cases, supplanted – by digital exchanges. In this context, the study of nonverbal cues in digital communication has gained special significance. Social media platforms, with their global reach, provide a unique space where NVC can bridge cultural gaps, fostering a deeper connection between brands and consumers.

This study delves into the strategic use of nonverbal communication by brands on social media. Guided by the **research question**, *"how can brands adapt their nonverbal communication strategies in social media to connect with different cultures and target audiences?"*, this project **primary objective** is to provide an exploratory analysis of how these strategies are adapted to resonate with various cultural nuances and target demographics, in order to enhance audience engagement and positively influence brand perception and consumer loyalty.

In order to achieve the project aim, these **specific objectives** were defined: (a) to identify main nonverbal communication elements; (b) to analyze how these elements are adapted across different cultures, considering cultural variations and audience preferences; (c) to evaluate the influence of nonverbal communication on audience behavior and engagement on social media; (d) to examine the role of semiotics in branding on social media, understanding how signs and symbols convey brand messages and values across different cultural contexts; (e) to assess the effectiveness of different nonverbal communication strategies in achieving communication appropriateness, effectiveness, and adaptability in various cultural settings.

To address these objectives, this study employs a qualitative research design, primarily utilizing a **literature review methodology**. Data were collected from a comprehensive review of existing literature, including academic journals, books, industry reports, conference proceedings, and online databases. **Chapter 1** delves into the foundational concepts of nonverbal communication, by defining NVC and outlining its broad scope, encompassing behaviors and cues beyond spoken words, such as facial expressions, gestures, posture, and eye contact. **Chapter 2** explores how nonverbal communication is influenced by cultural contexts, emphasizing the importance of understanding these cultural variations to improve intercultural competence. Finally, **Chapter 3** addresses the application of nonverbal communication in social media, considering how traditional NVC concepts translate into digital environments.

The **Conclusion** summarizes the major findings, discussing the implications for brand communication and providing recommendations for further research in the field of nonverbal communication strategies in social media.

1. Nonverbal communication: fundamental concepts

Communication can be defined, narrowly, as the transmission and exchange of messages, including symbols and signs. As an integral aspect of interpersonal interaction, it is ubiquitous across all species, intricately connected with their existence and evolutionary trajectory. Nonverbal communication (henceforth NVC) has a similar function both to animals and humans, however, as the first ones have no language, the only way of communicating about situations in physical world is through NVC (Argyle, 1996).

By far, the greatest part of the whole system of communication seems to be devoted to the organization of social behavior of the group, to dominance and subordination, the maintenance of peace and cohesion of the group, reproduction, and care of the young (Marler, 1965, p. 584).

Within the human species, communication similarly serves an important role in survival; however, it transcends mere imperatives. Human communication, notably, encompasses broader dimensions of cultural and social significance. According to professor Danesi (2022, p. 1), “this blend of nature and culture is a key characteristic of human communication”.

For a long time, it has been debated how much nonverbal communication can be more reliable than verbal communication. It is what dictates our relationships and social interactions, as absolutely none of them can occur without the use of NVC. The researcher Alfred Adler once wrote: “If we want to understand a person... We have to close our ears” (Adler, 1958, as cited in Bull, 1987, p. 3).

NVC is an innate human skill. Indeed, NVC is genuinely the primary form we use to express our emotions, sending, recognizing, and interpreting impressions and signals, and communicating messages such as dominance, personal distance, attraction, and rejection among others (Guerrero, Hecht & DeVito, 2008).

1.1. Definitions and scope

Human beings are social creatures. We spend most of our waking hours in contact with other people, engaging in various activities involving communication. In any context of human social life, there is an “unspoken dialogue”: a range of nonverbal aspects that

can be observed in daily interactions, ranging from mundane tasks to delicate negotiations (Burgoon, Guerrero & Floyd, 2010).

NVC encompasses a broad spectrum of behaviors and cues that occur in the absence of words, including but not limited to facial expressions, gestures, posture, eye contact, proxemics, and vocal intonations (Danesi, 2022; Hall, Horgan & Murphy, 2019). Charles Darwin's seminal work highlighted the evolutionary significance of NVC, tracing its origins to shared modes with other species, such as the display of teeth in anger, originally linked to predatory behavior (Danesi, 2022).

Adam Kendon (2010, as cited in Danesi, 2022) offers a comprehensive definition of NVC, framing it as the communicational functioning of bodily activities, gestures, facial expressions, orientation, and spatial positioning, along with touch and smell. According to Danesi (2022), NVC can be:

- a. conscious, as voluntary actions and expressions;
- b. unconscious, as involuntary actions;
- c. a blend of the two types, being partially involuntary and voluntary.

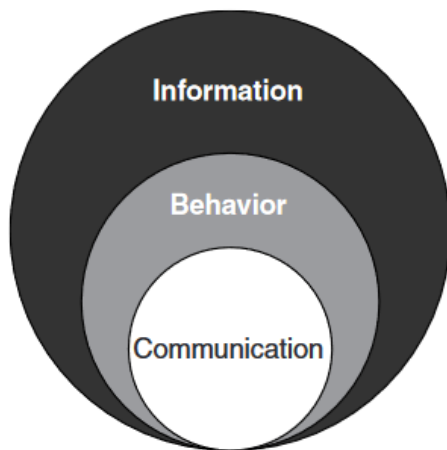
[...] While involuntary nonverbal behaviors may be based in biology, the voluntary ones are shaped instead by cultural upbringing (Danesi, 2022, p. 13).

The complexity of NVC lies in its integration with verbal behavior, influencing thought processes and language comprehension for both sender and receiver. Although hand gestures produced during speech are part of an integrated system, distinguishing between verbal and nonverbal cues is essential for understanding conveyed meanings. In any case, it is important to acknowledge the challenges in assigning specific meanings to nonverbal cues, considering that there is no 'dictionary of nonverbal cue meanings' that accounts for all the contextual factors and cultural variations, which have significant functions in nonverbal communication (Hall *et al.*, 2019).

The debate over the definition of NVC goes beyond and extends to the distinction between intentional communication and unintentional behavior. Burgoon *et al.* (2010) defend that not all behaviors warrant classification as communication. Their perspective defines communication as a subset of behavior, which in turn is a subset of information. This hierarchical relationship is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Relationship among information, behavior, and communication.



Source: Burgoon *et al.* (2010)

Ekman and Friesen (1969 as cited in Bull, 1987) argue that only behaviors intended to communicate can be qualified as NVC. Contrary to this perspective, Watzlawick *et al.* (1968 as cited in Bull, 1987) propose that all behavior conveys information and should be seen as communication. This view aligns with Watzlawick's axiom that "one cannot not communicate", indicating that even unintentional behaviors, such as body language or facial expressions that occur without conscious effort, still transmit information to observers.

Wiener *et al.* (1972 as cited in Bull, 1987) challenge both previous perspectives, emphasizing the necessity of establishing both transmission and reception of information for behavior to be classified as NVC. The authors also question the reliability of discerning intent behind behavior, suggesting that communication can occur without conscious intention or awareness of specific cues (Wiener *et al.*, 1972; Bull, 1987). As Knapp *et al.* (1978, p. 273) noted:

Some messages, for instance, are planned and sent with a high degree of conscious awareness; others seem more casually prepared; some messages are designed to look casual or unintentional; still others are more reflexive, habitual, or expressive responses; and some are "given off" rather than "given".

On the other hand, Knapp, Hall, and Horgan (2012) provide insights into the challenges of defining nonverbal communication, noting the difficulty in separating verbal and nonverbal behaviors into distinct categories. They defend that behaviors blur

the line between verbal and nonverbal communication, highlighting the complexity of the phenomenon.

Additionally, Matsumoto, Frank & Hwang (2013) expand the concept of nonverbal communication to include the behaviors and channels beyond body language, such as environmental factors, physical characteristics, and even odors. This broader perspective highlights the diffusive nature of nonverbal communication in human interaction, involving different aspects of behavior and sensory stimuli.

In essence, understanding NVC requires careful consideration of both verbal and nonverbal cues, recognizing their integrated nature and the challenges in interpreting their meanings in diverse contexts and cultural settings.

1.2. Elements of NVC

1.2.1. Nonverbal channels and codes

According to Burgoon *et al.* (2010), nonverbal communication's importance in human lives goes far beyond mere intuition. A very well-known study by Mehrabian and Wiener (1967) suggested that 93% of all meaning in emotional communication is conveyed through nonverbal cues, and only 7% originates from verbal context. This estimate has been discredited and traced back to flawed interpretations of early studies by the mentioned authors. More recent publications suggest that around 66% of meaning in human interactions derives from nonverbal cues (Philpott, 1983; Burgoon *et al.*, 2010). A considerable reduction on the estimate, but still emphasizing the significant role of nonverbal communication in interpersonal dynamics.

Additionally, Burgoon *et al.* (2010) affirm that:

Regardless of the actual percentage, plenty of evidence documents that people rely heavily on nonverbal cues to express themselves and to interpret others' communication. Research shows that when verbal messages contradict nonverbal ones, adults usually believe the nonverbal messages over the verbal ones and rely on nonverbal behavior to judge another's attitudes and feelings (p. 3).

Nonverbal communication is presented through a wide range of dynamic actions of facial expressions, vocal cues, and bodily movements, known as nonverbal behaviors. All these nonverbal behaviors convey nonverbal messages, that are transmitted by nonverbal channels. "We call these channels because, like channels on a television, they

are each capable of sending their own distinct message” (Matsumoto *et al.*, 2013, p. 6). Each of these channels operates in a distinctive manner, influenced by external aspects, such as biological, educational, and cultural influence (Argyle, 1996).

Guerrero and Hecht (2008) presented the *code approach*, a classification system based on the early work on nonverbal communication that determines the types of nonverbal codes by taking in consideration the channels by which they are transmitted. More specifically, which part of the body or environment throughout the message is sent. Nonverbal messages can be classified in various ways and are categorized by the authors as follows: “(1) physical appearance, (2) olfactics, (3) kinesics, (4) vocalics, (5) proxemics, (6) haptics, (7) chronemics, and (8) environmental features” (Gerrero & Hecht, 2008, p. 45).

For the purpose of this paper, we will focus on the five main types of nonverbal communication: *kinesics, haptics, vocalics, proxemics and chronemics*.

1.2.1.1. Kinesics

Probably the most commanding and important of the range of nonverbal codes, *kinesics* refers to all forms of body movements. The word is derived from the Greek roots “*kinesis*” and means “movement”. Kinesics is also popularly known as “body language”, and studies the hand, arm, body, and face movements (Leonard, 2012; Burgoon *et al.*, 2010).

Kinesics offers a variety of characteristics that contribute to its significance in nonverbal communication field. According to Burgoon *et al.* (2010), the richness of kinesics codes is exemplified by the vast array of physical signs humans can produce, that is estimated to be around 700,000. As it is demonstrated by Krout (1954) and Hewes (1957) the abundance of different kinds of gestures and postures (Figure 2) can be applied in a huge number of human social contexts. Besides that, the up to 20,000 different facial expressions, displayed by approximately 30 facial muscles, present the complexity and relevance of kinesics (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010).

Figure 2

Various postures identified by Hewes



Source: Burgoon et al. (2010)

Furthermore, kinesic cues have a fundamental role in human interaction due to human's innate capacity to recognize and interpret them. Vision, which accounts for approximately 80% of sensory perception, enables human beings to discern movements as brief as 1/50th of a second. This perceptual ability can also be extended to subtle facial expressions and body movements. Studies suggest that even fleeting cues lasting only 125 microseconds can be registered in the brain (McLeod & Rosenthal, 1983, as cited in Burgoon, 2016). The inherent bias towards looking to kinesic cues stems from humans' innate tendency to visually orient themselves towards others, emphasizing the importance of nonverbal communication in interpersonal exchanges (Burgoon & Hoobler, 2002).

Studies of infants provide further evidence for inborn elements of kinesic behavior. In the first few months of life, newborns display many kinesic reflexes. One is the imitation of face and head movements (Bjorklund, 1987; Meltzoff & Moore, 1989). Only 72 hours after birth, infants imitate adults' tongue protrusions and head movements, and they imitate facial gestures as early as 2 months. This imitation is innate and requires little cognitive function. Imitation of facial gestures helps newborns to maintain social interaction with adults in the period before their abilities to control gaze, head, and mouth movements develop (Burgoon et al., 2010, pp. 114-115).

The gesture depicted in Figure 3 is commonly observed in both infants and adults, as well as in other primates, when faced with similar situations. This suggests a shared behavioral pattern that extends across different stages of development and various species.

Figure 3

Tongue showing by (from left to right) (a) Michael Jordan, (b) human infant, (c) Maori warrior, (d) mother and child, and (e) adult gorilla.



Source: Burgoon et al. (2010)

Moreover, kinesics cannot be defined only by biological determinants; it encompasses cultural and contextual influences that defines the meanings attributed to body movements. Danesi (2022) affirms that some kinesics actions are innate and universally understood, such as facial expressions expressing basic emotions, while other gestures and postures acquire cultural connotations, based on different contexts. At least, kinesics behaviors can reveal states of mind, often supplementing or contradicting verbal communication (Danesi, 2022). This interplay between verbal and nonverbal cues shows the complexity of human communication, where kinesics can both convey meaning and facilitate social interactions (Ekman & Friesen, 2008).

1.2.1.2. Proxemics

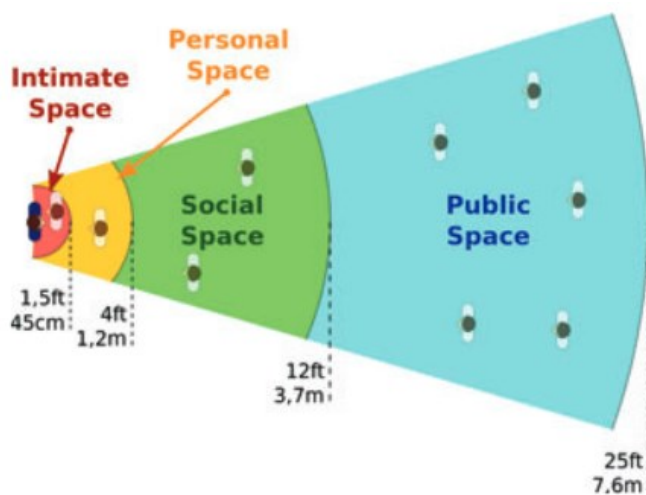
According to Hall (1974 as cited in Andersen, Gannon & Halchik, 2013, p. 296), *proxemics* is “the study of man’s [people’s] transactions as he perceives and uses intimate, personal, social and public space in various settings while following out-of-awareness dictates of cultural paradigms”. As elucidated by Matsumoto, Hwang & Frank (2016), interpersonal space delineates distinct zones that vary on degrees of intimacy, represented by four ‘invisible bubbles’ that surround individuals and serve as innate regulators of

intimacy by modulating sensory exposures, with closer distances intensifying sensory stimulation.

Hall established clear distinctions between the four zones: *intimate*, *personal*, *social*, and *public spaces*, with each one shaping and contextualizing human interaction, as illustrated in Figure 4 (Hall, 1974). The author described the zones that define interpersonal interaction using physical dimensions: intimate regards a reserved space that is shared only with family members, very close friends, lovers, and all children; personal zone is usually reserved for informal interactions with friends and acquaintances; the social space is dedicated to strangers and new acquaintances; and, at least, public space is used for events, such as speeches and performances.

Figure 4

Interpersonal zone



Source: Danesi (2022)

The first two are considered under the category of *microspace*, while the last two are considered, respectively, under the categories of *mesospace* and *macrospace* (Danesi, 2022). According to Danesi (2022, p. 149), “the study of the interpersonal behaviors within the different zones is the target of proxemics, including bodily orientation, posture, gazing, and haptic-tactile behavior”.

There is a set of factors determining the proxemic behavior, such as the size of the zones people tend to maintain apart from each other:

Postural identifiers (standing vs. sitting);
Gender identifiers (male vs. female);
Sociofugal-sociopetal orientation (face-to-face, back-to-back);
Kinesthetic factors (distances of body parts, within or beyond physical reach);
Tactility factors (permissible touch patterns within each zone);
Eye contact factors (gazing, looking away, looking directly into the eyes);
Thermal factors (whether radiated heat is detected or not);
Olfactory factors (detection of odor or breath);
Vocal factors (loudness of voice, tone of voice) (Danesi, 2022, p. 150).

The presented framework not only provides a categorization of spatial distances but also encompasses cultural variations in spatial norms and practices, emphasizing the influence of cultural paradigms on space perception and utilization (Andersen *et al.*, 2013).

The concept of personal space extends beyond mere physical distance, encompassing other important concepts. *Territoriality*, as explained by Andersen *et al.* (2013), refers to the innate drive to protect and defend spaces. This characteristic is shared by different species in nature and, in social human interactions, can be observed in daily life: “your preferred place to sit in a restaurant, your usual desk in the classroom, or the seat you’ve marked to save while getting concessions at a sporting event, we claim certain spaces as our own” (Leonard, 2012, p. 215). Each type of territory has its own set of norms and rules guiding how people must use it, and they can be negotiated within groups or social units.

Andersen *et al.* (2013) expand on the concept of *material space*, referring to all the tangible objects or artifacts owned by a person and utilized as a temporary or long term “marker”, used to indicate that some specific space and around belong to the marker’s owner, like a demarcation to territorial boundaries. For instance, people in public transportation commonly place some personal belonging, such as a briefcase, or purse, in the side seat, avoiding any “invasion” into the territory.

Cultural orientations, gender dynamics, and relational contexts have considerable influence on spatial preferences and perceptions (Andersen, Guerrero & Jones, 2016). Besides the established zones of interaction, intrusions into personal space occurs and can evoke discomfort and elicit defensive responses.

When personal space is invaded, individuals attempt to maintain comfortable personal space boundaries by changing body orientation, reducing eye contact and other forms of immediacy, retreating, or leave taking. When personal space is violated, people may deploy body buffers such as purses, briefcases, and even body parts such as folded arms to ward off these intruders. In most situations, individuals will behave in ways that seek to reestablish comfortable levels of personal space (Andersen *et al.* 2013, p. 297).

Interesting to say that it is possible to observe the perception of interpersonal zones examining the metaphors used to incorporate distance elements, such as: “we are getting closer”; or “your words are invasive”. This category was called *approach metaphor*, by Mehrabian (1972, as cited in Danesi, 2022) representing through words how situations are in real world, including the boundaries in interactive settings.

1.2.1.3. Haptics

The term *haptics* means the study of touching behavior, an important aspect of interpersonal communication (Smeltzer, Waltman & Leonard, 2008). An essential part of human interaction, touching is closely related to proxemics, as the physical contact requires the use of interpersonal space. This behavior is considered one of the most relevant to the human basic forms of communication, considering that is the first sense developed since early mother-infant caretaking (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013). Touch is “the foundation for communication with the world around us, and probably the single sense that is as old as life itself” (Sachs, 1988, p. 28, as cited in Burgoon *et al.*, 2010, p. 146). Still, “touch is vital to human development; loving physical contact, for example, enables children to reach full social and intellectual potential and helps them become comfortable with intimacy” (Andersen *et al.*, 2016, p. 266).

Touching has long been related to emotions, as a sign of closeness, comfort, or even compassion (Matsumoto & Hwang 2013), but this behavior is not necessarily affective. In recent decades, another issue has been discussed evoking significant questions about touching in consideration of the growing awareness of sexual harassment: “who, when, how much, and how often” (Smeltzer *et al.*, p. 189).

Touching can occur diversely, and is often categorized based on its usage, function, and intensity; moreover, it can vary in its “location, frequency, duration, action, intensity, and extent” (Andersen *et al.*, 2013, p. 299). Given the multiple ways of tactile interaction, it is relevant to note how these factors can influence the perceptions of how touch is evaluated, as well as the relational connotations it conveys (Andersen *et al.*, 2013).

Intensity refers to how soft or hard a touch is. For example, a “punch” can be playful if it is delivered softly or violent if it is delivered with force. *Duration* refers to how brief or prolonged the touch is. A couple might hold hands for a moment or for an hour. [...] *Location* refers to the place where a person is touched. Touches to various body parts are interpreted differently. [...] *Frequency* describes the number of touches that occur. [...] Finally, the *instrument of touch* makes a difference. Although people usually touch with their hands, they can also touch with other body parts, such as feet, lips, and shoulders, or with objects, such as the tip of a pencil (Burgoon, Manusov & Guerrero, 2022, p. 150).

According to Heslin (1974, as cited in Andersen *et al.*, 2013), there are five main categories of touch:

Functional-professional (also called *instrumental touch*) is a least personal touch and occurs in institutional situations ruled by professional conduct, for example, doctors, chiropractors, and massage therapists;

Social-polite touch is used in different social settings, such as first-meetings, business, and formal events, usually exemplified by the gesture of a handshake. Its function is to convey respect, inclusivity and a sense of equality among individuals;

Friendship-warmth touch represents both significance and negotiation between individuals. Touching in private areas or excessive physical contact may be interpreted as indicating romantic interest, while insufficient touch could be perceived as disinterest, potentially impeding the development of friendships or deeper connections;

Love-intimacy touch has a deeply personal nature, typically shared only between individuals in close relationships such as romantic partners, intimate friends, or immediate family members. It is exemplified by actions like kissing and handholding and conveys affection, trust, and mutual respect;

Sexually arousing touch is the most intense, intimate, and private category. While sexual arousal can be triggered by various stimuli, including verbal cues, gaze, and even smell and taste, touch at close interpersonal distances is the core of sexuality. Non-sexual touch typically occurs within defined boundaries, on specific body zones such as the shoulders, hands, small of the back, and arms. “Men can be touched anywhere above the waist, but thighs, buttocks, and genitals are taboo areas for both sexes. In ascending order of sexuality are the ears, neck, mouth, thighs, breasts, and genitals for women” (Andersen *et al.*, 2013, p. 302) – that react in a negative way to uninvited genital touch from an acquaintance, while men usually react positively.

Each category of touch leads to the next progressively, although the boundaries between them are not always clearly delineated, making it challenging to discern where one category ends and another begins. For this distinction, the cultural aspects turn

crucial, considering the level of haptics that could be appropriated to each circumstance (Smeltzer *et al.*, 2008).

1.2.1.4. Vocalics (paralanguage)

Vocalics, often referred to as *paralanguage* (meaning “along-with language”), sometimes also *prosody* or *noncontent speech*, represents any vocal cues beyond the spoken word that contribute to communication. Vocal cues such as pitch, speaking, loudness, pauses, laughs, and volume, are important tools to convey emotional reactions, emphasizing, and regulating conversational dynamics (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010). All the variations in the voice that accompany speech and convey its meanings are called *prosody* (Knapp *et al.*, 2012).

Communication through vocalizations is not exclusive to our species and each individual has personal vocal traits, just like fingerprints, named vocal qualities (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010; Guerrero & Hecht, 2008). The human ear’s ability to perceive frequencies ranging from 16 Hz to 20,000 Hz permits recognizing variations in sound, facilitating the identification of familiar voices and interpretation of vocal cues (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010).

From a structural perspective, the analysis of the voice can be approached perceptually, linguistically, or acoustically. *Perceptually*, it is possible to describe vocal qualities such as pitch, loudness, tempo, and resonance when characterizing a speaker’s voice; *linguists* focus on segmenting language into its constituents, highlighting phonemes, prosody, and voice qualities such as accent and fluency; and *acoustically*, voice is described in terms of sound wave frequencies, formants, intensity, and tempo, providing insights into the physiological and emotional dimensions of vocal communication (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010).

Through vocal cues it is possible to discern certain personality traits. However, this may be complex, relying not only on the speaker’s expression but also on the listener’s perceptiveness. According to Knapp *et al.* (2012):

Extraversion/introversion is the trait dimension best documented in vocal cues of American speakers. Cues associated with a speaker’s actual, not just perceived, extraversion, when compared to introversion, are more fluency – that is, shorter pauses when the speaking turn switches from one speaker to another, shorter silent pauses within a person’s speech, and fewer hesitations – faster rate, louder speech, more dynamic contrast, higher pitch (up to a point), and more variable pitch. In addition, extraverted people have been shown to talk more, in both number of words and total speaking time. [...] Nevertheless, in light of some of the robust vocal manifestations of extraversion, it is not surprising that people use vocal cues such as loudness, fullness, and enunciation as a basis for judging extraversion (p. 333).

Addington (1968, as cited in Knapp *et al.*, 2012) conducted one of the most comprehensive studies in this domain, demonstrating how voice can be associated to a myriad of personality traits and stereotypes, including dominance, attractiveness, energy, enthusiasm, and more. The findings of this research are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Simulated vocal cues and personality stereotypes

Vocal Cue	Speakers	Stereotyped Perceptions
Breathiness	Males	Younger, more artistic
	Females	More feminine, prettier, more petite, effervescent, high-strung, shallower
Thinness	Males	Did not alter the listener’s image of the speaker, no significant correlations
	Females	Increased social, physical, emotional, and mental immaturity; increased sense of humor and sensitivity
Flatness	Males	More masculine, more sluggish, colder, more withdrawn
	Females	More masculine, more sluggish, colder, more withdrawn
Nasality	Males	A wide array of socially undesirable characteristics
	Females	A wide array of socially undesirable characteristics
Tenseness	Males	Older, more unyielding, cantankerous
	Females	Younger; more emotional, high-strung; less intelligent
Throatiness	Males	Older, more realistic, mature, sophisticated, well adjusted
	Females	Less intelligent; more masculine; lazier; more boorish, unemotional, ugly, sickly, careless, inartistic, naive, humble, neurotic, quiet, uninteresting, apathetic
Increased rate	Males	More animated and extraverted
	Females	More animated and extraverted
Increased pitch	Males	More dynamic, feminine, esthetically inclined
Variety	Females	More dynamic and extraverted

Source: Knapp *et al.* (2012)

Culture also has profound influence on vocal communication, delineating norms regarding volume and conversational distance, that are considered standard and nonstandard forms of speech (Burgoon *et al.* 2010). For instance, cultural variations in personal space preferences impact speaking volume, with individuals from cultures accustomed to closer proximities perceiving louder speech as intrusive. On the same hand, cultures with larger personal space allowances may perceive softer speech as indicative of disinterest or rudeness (Leonard, 2012).

Vocalics influences social interactions, physiological responses, and emotional states. Research indicates that vocal cues, such as tone and intonation, can elicit physiological changes comparable to physical contact, underscoring the significance of vocal expressions in interpersonal communication (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, the nature of interpersonal relationship might have strong influence on the vocal responses too. “Conversations between opposite sex and same-sex friends were characterized by more fluency, shorter response latencies, fewer silences, and more vocal interest than conversations between romantic partners” (Guerrero, 1994, as cited in Burgoon *et al.*, 2010, p. 142).

1.2.1.5. Chronemics

“Time is, without a doubt, one of the most crucial, yet most neglected, variables of communication” (Fisher, 1978, as cited in Burgoon *et al.*, 2010, p. 186). The comment, almost 50 years later, remains true, especially considering that the entire communication process relies on time itself. The term *chronemics*, from the Greek roots “chrono” meaning time, delves into the interlaced relationship between time and human interaction (Leonard, 2012). Chronemics, this essential element of nonverbal communication, refers to how individuals perceive, structure, and utilize time in various social and cultural contexts (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010). Chronemic cues can “also help promote intimacy. Being on time, staying up late to help someone, and spending a lot of time together can all communicate intimacy and affection” (Guerrero & Wiedmaier, 2013, p. 587).

Chronemics operates at multiple levels, encompassing physical, biological, personal, social, and cultural dimensions (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010). At *physical and*

biological dimensions, time involves the rhythms and cycles of life, connected with earth and human body. Those dictate the pace and timing of daily activities and perception of temporal cues. The personal level is related with individual differences in time usage, which contributes to personal temporal experiences and behaviors. Although personal temporalities may not conform to a universal standard, they significantly influence interpersonal communication dynamics and the interpretation of chronemic cues. (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010). In the cultural level, perceptions of time also vary significantly, shaping communication patterns and social norms.

At the sociocultural level, time can be classified into technical time, formal time, or informal time (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010). *Technical time* refers to ‘clock time’, the standardized, precise, and objective measure of time that governs global activities through time zones and scheduling, supplanting the ancient idea of using natural cycles, such as seasons and lunar phases. *Formal time* represents the culturally determined perception and organization of time within specific societies. For instance, Western cultures often adopts a precise, segmented, and hierarchical approach to time (with seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, etc.), while in rural cultures, time is organized by season, or based on which specific agricultural product is being sold currently. Finally, *informal time* refers to a roughly structured temporal system that operates implicitly, learned through everyday experiences and interactions rather than formal education. These informal rules and interpretations are often absorbed during childhood from caregivers, shaping individuals’ perceptions of time without their conscious awareness (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010). Every person learns, early in life, a time perspective that matches with the values and needs of his own society. According to Gonzalez and Zimbardo (2008):

Our temporal perspective influences a wide range of psychological processes, from motivation, emotion and spontaneity to risk taking, creativity and problem solving. Individual behavior is regulated by subjugating the urgences of the present to the learned demands of past and future. Without an articulate sense of the future, the force of obligations, liabilities, expectations and goal setting is diminished (p. 245).

Additionally, according to Burgoon *et al.* (2010), different levels of chronemics sent different temporal messages that can be perceived as messages:

Punctuality (arriving at scheduled events on time);
Wait time (amount of time before a scheduled event commences);
Lead time (amount of forewarning for a scheduled event);
Duration (length of time dedicated to an event);
Simultaneity (single or multiple activities per time unit) (p. 192).

Among the multiple forms of time organization systems, two of them stand out: *monochronic* and *polychronic*. “Monochronic time means paying attention to and doing only one thing at a time. Polychronic time means being involved with many things at once” (Hall & Hall, 2008, p. 254).

Monochronic culture’s view time in a linear way, as a tangible commodity that can be managed, scheduled, and adhered to strictly (Leonard, 2012). In a simpler way, time can be compared to money, considering the perception that time can be “spent”, “saved”, “wasted” or “lost” (Hall & Hall, 2008). In sharp contrast, polychronic cultures adopt a more fluid approach to time, where appointments may overlap, and schedules are less rigidly enforced (Leonard, 2012). “Rather than thinking of time as a finite commodity that must be managed properly to avoid being wasted, polychronic societies [...] conceive of it more like a never-ending river, flowing infinitely into the future” (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010, p. 196). Hall and Hall (2008) presented a distinction between the two types of time cultures, as shown in the Table 2.

Table 2

Comparison between monochronic and polychronic cultures

Monochronic People	Polychronic People
do one thing at a time	do many things at once
concentrate on the job	distractible and subject to interruptions
take time commitments (deadlines, schedules) seriously	consider time commitments an objective to be achieved, if possible
low-context and need information	high-context and have information
are committed to the job	committed to people and relationships
adhere religiously to plans	change plans often and easily
are concerned about not disturbing others; follow rules of privacy and consideration	are more concerned with those who are closely related (family, friends, close business associates) than with privacy
show great respect for private property; seldom borrow or lend	borrow and lend things often and easily
emphasize promptness	base promptness in the relationship
are accustomed to short-term relationships	have strong tendency to build lifetime relationships

Source: Hall & Hall (2008)

The way time is structured and perceived can convey subtle messages about the importance of relationships, punctuality, and social rules (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010). For instance, punctuality, wait time, and the duration of interactions serve as indicators of relational closeness and intimacy (Guerrero & Wiedmaier, 2013). Delays in response time, whether in face-to-face or computer-mediated communication, can influence perceptions of intimacy and affection in interpersonal relationships (Guerrero & Wiedmaier, 2013). These cultural disparities in time perception can provoke misunderstandings and frustrations between people from different cultural backgrounds (Leonard, 2012).

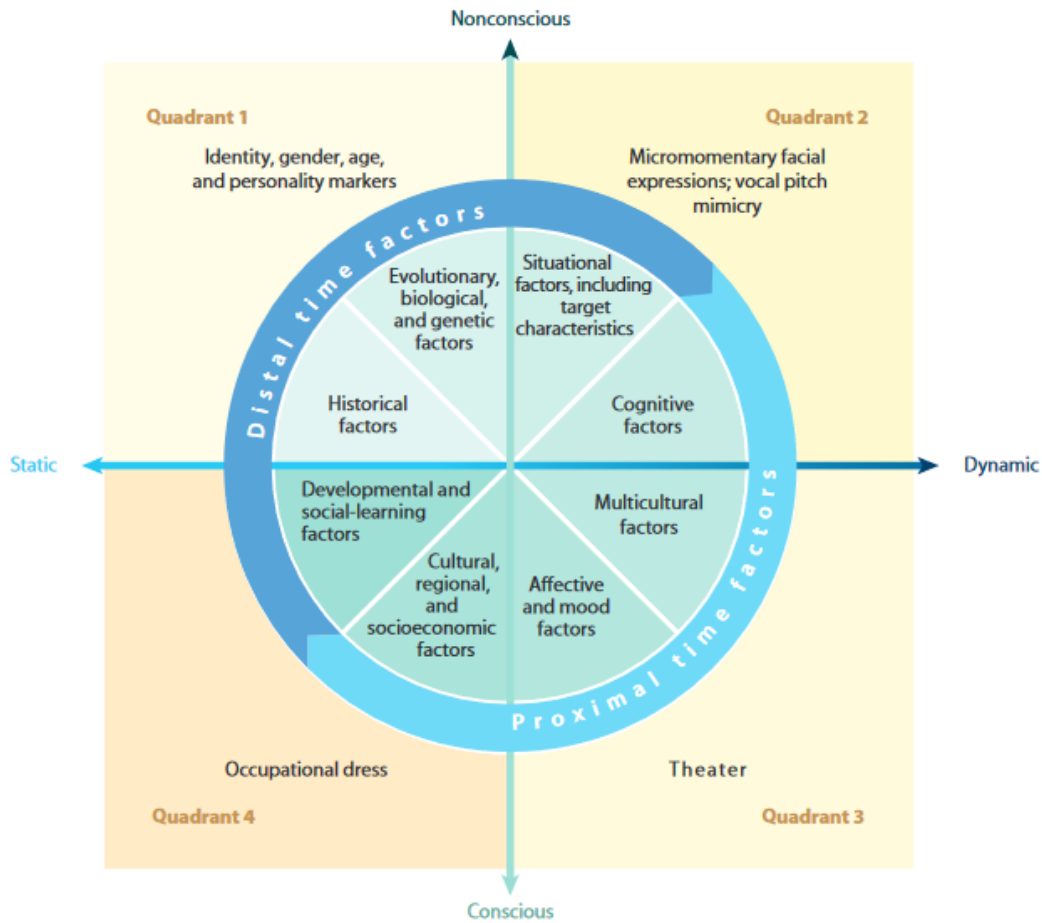
1.2.2. Encoding and decoding

Encoding refers to the process through which individuals transmit cues and information via various nonverbal channels, including visual, auditory, olfactory, and tactile modalities (Hall *et al.*, 2019; Matsumoto *et al.*, 2016). These cues encompass a wide array of elements, such as the sender's identity, emotional state, cognitive processes, and social interactions. Still, it is important to say that "the informational value of each sender cue may be reinforced, contradicted, augmented, minimized, or not impacted at all by other sender cues or contextual factors that accompany it" (Hall *et al.*, 2019, p. 274).

Senders may encode cues spontaneously or deliberately, with some cues being informative to themselves, perceivers, or both. The informational value of encoded cues can be influenced by contextual factors and may be reinforced, contradicted, augmented, minimized, or unaffected by accompanying cues. Understanding the continuum of encoding, from static to dynamic cues and from nonconscious to conscious processes, is essential for comprehending the nuances of nonverbal communication (Hall *et al.*, 2019). Hall *et al.* (2019) illustrate the concept in Figure 5.

Figure 5

A framework for reviewing recent findings pertaining to nonverbal encoding



Source: Hall *et al.* (2019)

The horizontal axis demonstrates that encoding covers a range of static and dynamic cues, while the vertical axis covers the encoding processes, from conscious to nonconscious. Within the resulting quadrants, examples of encoded information are illustrated. Quadrants 1 and 2 involve cues transmitted nonconsciously and perceived as relatively static by observers. These cues, such as a sender's age, are consistent across various contexts and may serve as indicators of specific attributes, such as biological sex or personality traits. These cues may serve as markers of various attributes and can impact perceivers' interpretations of the sender's identity and characteristics. The center circle illustrates how both proximal (situational factors) and distal (sender's developmental history) time factors influence the perceived value of these cues along the two axes. In quadrant 3, individuals in theatrical settings may consciously modify their voice to

embody a character, representing a proximal factor, while their ability to convey different voices is influenced by distal factors such as practice. Quadrant 4 encompasses scenarios where individuals consciously select attire, influenced by both proximal factors like role-specific uniforms and distal factors such as cultural traditions (Hall *et al.*, 2019).

Decoding refers to the perceiver's process of interpreting nonverbal cues. According to Hall *et al.* (2019, p. 282):

One cannot avoid communicating nonverbally, because one's cues (or absence of cues) will be interpreted by others. Those cues may or may not be conveyed intentionally, and they may or may not be interpreted correctly, but in any case, they will impact social relationships.

This process involves both automatic and controlled cognitive components, with initial interpretations often occurring rapidly and outside of conscious awareness. Studies have demonstrated that perceivers can make trait judgments within milliseconds of exposure to facial expressions, highlighting the automaticity of decoding (Borkenau *et al.*, 2009, as cited in Hall *et al.*, 2019).

Moreover, such as encoding process, decoding proficiency is influenced by various factors, including the perceiver's emotional state, personality traits, and demographic attributes. For instance, women tend to outperform men in decoding nonverbal cues, particularly in emotion recognition tasks. Additionally, perceiver's motivation and training can impact decoding accuracy, with feedback and practice shown to enhance performance (Halberstadt, Parker & Castro, 2013).

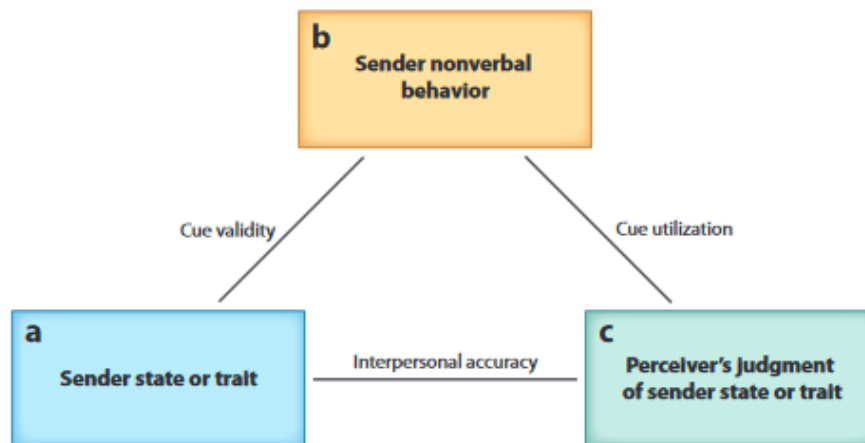
The *Brunswik lens model* provides a theoretical framework for studying decoding accuracy in interpersonal perception, emphasizing the interaction between sender behavior, cue validity, cue utilization, and perceiver judgments (Nestler & Back, 2013, as cited in Hall *et al.*, 2019).

Hall *et al.* (2019) presented a lens model modified from Brunswik (1956), as illustrated in Figure 6. In this model, interpersonal perception and interpersonal accuracy are further detailed: (a) sender state or trait refers to a quantifiable aspect in a subject, such as a mood state or personality trait; (b) sender nonverbal behavior represents the expressed nonverbal actions of the sender; and (c) perceiver's judgment relates to the observer's interpretation of the sender's state or trait. Cue validity indicates the consistency between the sender's nonverbal behavior and their actual state or trait, while cue utilization indicates the consistency between the sender's nonverbal behavior and the

perceiver's interpretation. Interpersonal accuracy represents the match between the sender's state or trait and the perceiver's evaluation (Hall *et al.*, 2019).

Figure 6

Modified from Brunswik (1956) lens model



Source: Hall *et al.* (2019)

Research utilizing the lens model has demonstrated that perceivers can achieve interpersonal accuracy in decoding various social and personality characteristics, including emotions, intelligence, and self-esteem (Reynolds & Gifford, 2001, as cited in Hall *et al.* 2019).

Burgoon *et al.* (2010) present the pivotal role of emotional intelligence in the encoding and decoding of emotions.

The concept of emotional intelligence refers to the ability to understand, manage, and utilize your emotions to meet goals, and to understand the emotions of others. [...] There are four essential components involved in emotional intelligence: recognition, understanding, motivation, and management (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010, p. 311).

According to the authors, encoding involves the expression of emotions through verbal and nonverbal cues, while decoding pertains to the interpretation and understanding of these emotional signals in interpersonal interactions (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010). Within the framework of emotional intelligence, individuals proficient in encoding possess the ability to express their emotions authentically and adaptively (Goleman, 1995). They demonstrate skill in conveying emotional states through facial expressions,

vocal intonations, gestures, and other nonverbal behaviors, facilitating accurate transmission of emotional messages in communication (Mayer *et al.*, 2001).

In the same way, decoding proficiency enables individuals to perceive and comprehend the emotional cues exhibited by others. Emotionally intelligent individuals adeptly discern subtle variations in facial expressions, body language, and vocal nuances, allowing for accurate interpretation of others' emotional states and intentions (Burgoon, Buller, Guerrero & Feldman, 1996).

Moreover, the connection between emotional intelligence and effective encoding and decoding extends to different contexts, including social interactions, professional settings, and intimate relationships. Individuals with high emotional intelligence demonstrate superior communication skills, fostering rapport, empathy, and mutual understanding through their adeptness in expressing and interpreting emotions (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010).

Furthermore, researchers indicate that encoding and decoding abilities are influenced by factors such as age, gender, and cultural background. While women may exhibit greater expressiveness and proficiency in encoding positive emotions, men may excel in encoding certain negative emotions (Guerrero & Floyd, 2006). Similarly, differences in decoding accuracy have been observed across genders and age groups, highlighting the complex interplay between individual differences and socio-cultural influences in emotional communication (Zuckerman *et al.*, 1976; Harrigan, 1984, as cited in Knapp *et al.* 2012).

1.2.3. Functions of NVC

From Knapp *et al.* (2012), various dimensions of verbal and nonverbal behavior have been consistently reported by researchers from diverse fields over the past decades. It is not possible to consider the nonverbal dimension in an isolated way. Both verbal and nonverbal dimensions are considered fundamental responses to our environment and are essential in attributing meaning to both verbal and nonverbal behavior.

Verbal and nonverbal communication have a codependent relation. Kendon (1983, pp. 17-20, as cited in Knapp *et al.*, 2012, p. 14) puts it this way:

It is a common observation that, when a person speaks, muscular systems besides those of the lips, tongue, and jaws often become active. [...] Gesticulation is organized as part of the same overall unit of action by which speech is also organized. [...] Gesture and speech are available as two separate modes of representation and are coordinated because both are being guided by the same overall aim. That aim is to produce a pattern of action that will accomplish the representation of a meaning.

Like verbal communication, nonverbal signals can have multiple uses and meanings, including denotative and connotative meanings, and can actively communicate *liking*, as when reacting to situations by evaluating as positive or negative; *power*, as acting or perceiving behaviors that indicate status; and *responsiveness*, which represents the perceptions of activities, as active or passive (Knapp *et al.*, 2012). According to the authors, these three dimensions can be considered “basic responses to our environment and are reflected in the way we assign meaning to both verbal and nonverbal behavior”.

One important aspect highlighted by Ekman (1965, as cited in Knapp *et al.*, 2012) is the interrelation between verbal and nonverbal behaviors during human interaction, including *repeating*, *conflicting*, *complementing*, *substituting*, *accenting/moderating*, and *regulating*.

Repeating: nonverbal communication can simply repeat what was said verbally [...].

Conflicting: verbal and nonverbal signals can be at variance with one another in a variety of ways. They may communicate two contradictory messages or two messages that seem incongruous with each other [...].

Complementing: nonverbal behavior can modify or elaborate on verbal messages. When the verbal and nonverbal channels are complementary, rather than conflicting, our messages are usually decoded more accurately [...].

Substituting: nonverbal behavior can also substitute for verbal messages. It may indicate more permanent characteristics (sex, age), moderately long-lasting features (personality, attitudes, social group), and relatively short-term states of a person [...].

Accenting/moderating: Nonverbal behavior may accent (amplify) or moderate (tone down) parts of the verbal message [...].

Regulating: nonverbal behavior is also used to regulate verbal behavior (Knapp *et al.*, 2012, pp. 15-19).

On the other hand, while the insights presented by Ekman (1965, as cited in Knapp, 2012) shed considerable light on the fundamental functions of nonverbal communication, it is important to consider that these functions are not universally accepted as definitive. Burgoon *et al.* (2010) offers a counterpoint perspective, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of NVC and challenging the notion of a singular understanding of its functions, expanding the scope of nonverbal communication functions beyond the traditional categories proposed by Ekman. While the former’s categories highlight the interdependence between verbal and nonverbal cues, they may not capture the full spectrum of functions that NVC serves. “Nonverbal behaviors need

not be relegated to auxiliary status. Not only do they hold equal partnership with verbal behavior in accomplishing numerous communication functions, but they also often operate independently in achieving communication goals” (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010, p. 21).

In contrast to Ekman’s focus on the interdependence between verbal and nonverbal cues, the approach of Burgoon *et al.* (2010) focuses on the dynamic and multifunctional nature of nonverbal communication. By delineating various functions, such as *message production and processing, social cognition and impression formation, expressing real and desired identities, expressing emotions, communicating relational messages, making connections and managing conversations, and deceiving others*, this framework provides a comprehensive understanding of the diverse roles played by nonverbal behaviors in human interaction (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010). In this essence, while Ekman’s model provides valuable insights into the interplay between verbal and nonverbal cues, Burgoon’s perspective offers a broader and more nuanced understanding of nonverbal communication functions, enriching our comprehension of the complex dynamics of human interaction.

1.2.4. Congruence and incongruence

A nonverbal message is rarely sent isolated. This means that, usually, it comes with different combined signals, such as gaze, or a gesture, creating what Allan & Barbara Pease (2004) call “nonverbal cluster”. *Nonverbal congruence* “refers to consistency among different nonverbal expressions within a cluster” (Leonard, 2012) and has an important role in shaping effectiveness and perceived credibility of interpersonal interactions. Calero (2005) explains the concept, saying that when verbal and nonverbal messages align, listeners are more inclined to trust and comprehend the speaker’s intentions; while, on the other hand, incongruent messages are received in an uncertain way, leading to confusion and skepticism.

‘Actions speaks louder than words’. This familiar expression can represent the impact of nonverbal cues on communication dynamics and the contradictions between verbal and nonverbal messages. *Incongruence* arises when there is a dissonance between verbal and nonverbal cues, creating ambiguity and undermining the speaker’s perceived sincerity (Calero, 2005).

Directly related to the concept of congruence or incongruence and given the interactive experience we acquire as part of the cognitive processes, are the inter-gesture masking behaviors. [...] Ekman identifies various ways in which people (more often than we imagine) try to conceal the expressive kinesics behavior which is already conveying a specific emotion or thought by camouflaging it or masking it, even as consciously as we would the meaning of our words. [...] While Ekman refers only to kinesics, we should also acknowledge the possible addition of paralinguistic and even verbal language in such situations. The words chosen and how they are said can have a strong bearing on these more or less subtle masking processes, since often the three components of speech, given their inherent interrelationships, are mutually complementary in dissimulation and feigning acts (Poyatos, 2002, pp. 207-208).

The significance of congruence extends beyond mere verbal articulation, permeating through different spheres of social interaction. The called *postural congruence*, according to Schefflen, “indicates similarity in views or roles in the group; conversely, non-congruence of posture he argued is used to indicate marked divergences in attitude or in status” (Schefflen, 1964, as cited in Bull, 1987, p. 15). The author also defends that inclusiveness can be observed by the congruence in postures of the group members – when seated in a line, people should turn inward, and limit the open space, as an indication of limited access in and out the group space, the called *bookending effect*.

Through the multichannel nature of nonverbal communication, convergence has the potential of both increasing credibility and increased ambiguity, depending on how the nonverbal cues will be decoded by the receptor.

2. Intercultural considerations in NVC

Intercultural communication can be succinctly defined as “a symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process in which people from different cultures create shared meanings” (Lustig & Koester, 2010, p. 46). On the contrary, Matsumoto and Juang (2022) delineate its counterpart, *intracultural communication*, which represents “communication among people of the same cultural background”. It is important to note that in intracultural communication processes, implicitly, communicators share the same ground rules about encoding and decoding messages.

In intercultural communication, several potential obstacles may arise, including assumptions of similarities between individuals; differences in verbal language; misinterpretations of nonverbal cues; preconceptions and stereotypes; the human tendency to evaluate others; the presence of strong emotions like anxiety and stress; uncertainty and ambiguity; and conflicts. All of them occur because, unlike intracultural situations, interactants cannot consistently send or receive signals unambiguously. “Even if interactants are somewhat successful in unpackaging signals, the messages interpreted may be partial, ambiguous, or misunderstood” (Matsumoto & Juang, 2022, p. 244). Recognizing the significance of intercultural and intracultural communication is essential for exploring the functions of cross-cultural nonverbal communication.

As a universal language, nonverbal communication serves to transcend linguistic barriers and facilitate cross-cultural interactions. However, the interpretation and expression of nonverbal cues are heavily influenced by cultural norms and values (Neuliep, 2021). Wood (as cited in Samovar, Porter, McDaniel & Roy, 2013, p. 273) writes: “most nonverbal communication isn’t instinctual, but is learned in the process of socialization”. This way, understanding the interaction between culture, social patterns and NVC is relevant for effective communication in diverse settings.

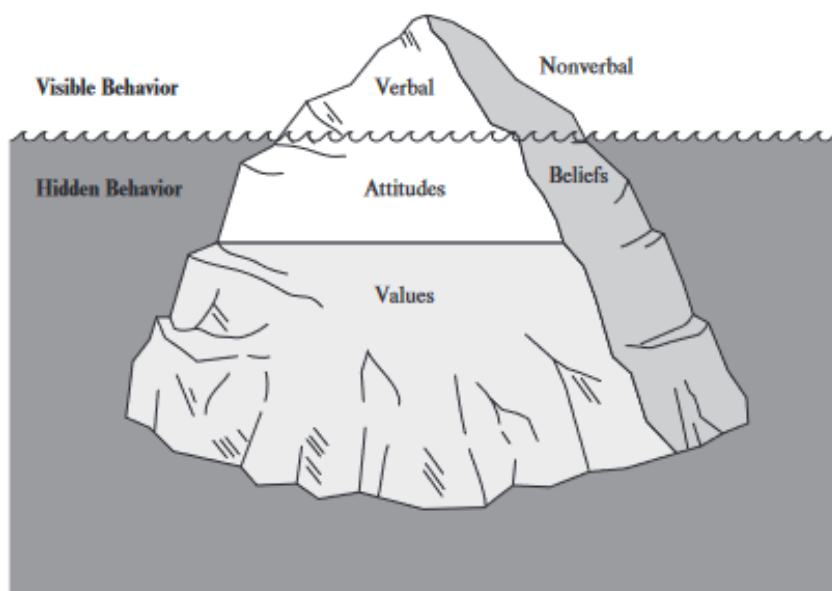
While verbal messages convey content meaning, nonverbal messages carry strong identity and relational meaning. Nonverbal messages signify who we are via our artifacts (e.g., the clothes we wear), our vocal cues, our nonverbal self-presentation modes, and the interpersonal spaces we claim for ourselves (e.g., members of southern European cultures prefer closer distances than do northern Europeans) (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019, p. 233).

Culture permeates every aspect of human behavior, including nonverbal communication (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). Sociocultural settings, as values, beliefs,

and norms, shape individuals' encoding and decoding of nonverbal cues, contributing to cultural-specific communication patterns. Individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds may assign different meanings to gestures, facial expressions, and other nonverbal behaviors and cues (Neuliep, 2021). Moreover, these settings influence the standards by which we assess the appropriateness or inappropriateness of nonverbal behavior in a specific cultural context (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012).

Figure 7

The visible and hidden layers of culture



Source: Martin & Nakayama (2022)

As shown in Figure 7, in the metaphorical representation of the iceberg, visible behaviors encompass both verbal and nonverbal cues, representing only the surface manifestations of communication. Below the surface lie the hidden behaviors, like attitudes, beliefs, and values. These submerged elements have profound influence on individuals' communication styles and interpretations, often shaped by cultural norms.

According to Storti (2015), a cultural pattern can be defined as a dimension of human experience shared across all cultures, manifesting differently from one culture to another. For example, the concept of personal identity, which is universal, it assumes different forms among cultures, as it is influenced by various factors. To facilitate comparison, many of the dimensions are frequently framed as *dichotomies*. This approach

allows each culture to be situated along a continuum delineated by two extremes. Table 3 illustrates several typical patterns, each characterized by two poles, facilitating the analysis of cultural differences.

Table 3

Examples of General Cultural Patterns

<i>Pattern</i>	<i>Range of Cultural Manifestation</i>
Locus of control	Internalism to externalism
Concept of self/identity	Individualism to collectivism
Power distance	High to low
Uncertainty avoidance	High to low
Future orientation	Short-term to long-term
Performance orientation	High to low (task orientation to relationship orientation)
Assertiveness	High to low
Communication style	High context to low context (direct to indirect)
Concept of fairness	Universalism to particularism
Concept of limits	Unlimited possibility/opportunity to limited
View of human nature	Benign to skeptical (good to evil)
Concept of time	Monochronic to polychronic
Concept of status	Egalitarian to hierarchical (achieved to ascribed)

Source: Storti (2015)

While a huge number of cultural dimensions have been identified, there are five dimensions in particular that are closely associated to nonverbal communication studies: *individualistic* and *collectivistic cultures*; *low* and *high-contact cultures*; *low* and *high-power distance*; *low* and *high-context*; and *feminine* and *masculine cultures* (Burgoon *et al.* 2010).

2.1. Sociocultural dimensions' impact on NVC

2.1.1. Individualistic and collectivistic cultures

The contrast between individualistic and collectivistic cultures underscores the degree to which a society prioritizes individual versus collective interests. In *individualistic cultures*, people tend to emphasize the relevance of individual identity over group identity: personal space, autonomy, privacy, freedom, and the right to express themselves verbally and emotionally (Burgoon *et.al*, 2010). “Individualism promotes self-efficiency, individual responsibility, and personal autonomy” (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012, p. 45) and individualistic cultures tend to value the spontaneous expression of both positive and negative emotions, especially in close social interactions (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010; Neuliep, 2021).

In contrast, *collectivistic cultures* emphasize harmony among people and with nature, valuing togetherness, loyalty, and tradition, where the needs of the group are perceived as more important than those of any individual (Burgoon *et.al*, 2010; Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019). In simpler terms, collectivistic cultures prioritize group identity over individual identity, group rights over individual rights, and the needs of the collective group over individual desires. “Collectivism promotes relational interdependence, ingroup harmony, and ingroup collaborative spirit” (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019, p. 170).

Highly individualistic cultures, such as the dominant cultures found in most northern and western regions of Europe and in North America countries and exemplified by the United States, Australia, Netherlands, and England, have the autonomy of individuals as a predominant aspect. The individuals take decisions based on what is good for themselves and the judgement of what is right or wrong comes from each individual’s point of view (Lustig & Koester, 2010).

On the other hand, collectivistic cultures, such as those in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Central and South America, and the Pacific Islands, “require an absolute loyalty to the group, though the relevant group might be as varied as the nuclear family, the extended family, a caste, or a jati (a subgrouping of a caste)” (Lustig & Koester, 2010, p. 117).

In daily interactions within family, school, and the workplace, the contrasting values of individualism and collectivism become evident, as presented in Table 4. Individualistic societies prioritize loose connections between individuals, where each person is responsible for themselves and their immediate family. In contrast, collectivistic

societies emphasize tightly interwoven bonds within the community, where individuals rely heavily on each other for support and cooperation (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012).

Table 4

Value characteristics in individualistic and collectivistic cultures

Situations	Individualistic cultures	Collectivistic cultures
General	“I” identity	“We” identity
Family	Nuclear family	Extended family
Relationship	Privacy regulation	Relational harmony
School	Individual competition	Teamwork
Workplace	Personal competence	Ingroup emphasis
Communication	Direct patterns	Indirect patterns
Personality equivalence	Independent self	Interdependent self

Source: Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012)

These distinctions in nonverbal behavior between individualistic and collectivistic cultures are further underscored by differences in proxemics, body movements, and facial expressions. According to Knapp *et al.* (2012), individualistic nonverbal signals “may include such things as environments designed for privacy; eye gaze and vocal signals that exude confidence, strength, and dynamism; and distinctive clothing” (p. 409). Moreover, individuals from individualistic cultures tend to maintain more distant proximities (Neuliep, 2021).

Cultures with a collective orientation tend to emphasize things that show the value they put on their group membership. [...] We would expect nonverbal signals in collective cultures to exhibit familiar routines, rituals, and ways of behaving that are widely known and practiced in the culture; a high frequency of deference behavior, such as bowing, gaze avoidance, and politeness routines that include the suppression of emotional displays that might offend the group; and behavior designed to avoid calling attention to the actions of an individual when it could be detrimental to the group (Knapp *et al.*, 2012, p. 410).

Considering the emphasis on maintaining group harmony and equilibrium, expressions of negative emotions are often inhibited within collectivistic cultures. As Beaupre and Hess (2005, as cited in Burgoon *et al.*, 2010) highlight, individuals from these cultures may have greater difficulty in recognizing and identifying facial expressions of negative emotion compared to their counterparts in individualistic cultures.

2.1.2. High and low-contact cultures

Expressions of cultural differences in interpersonal contact and immediacy are evident across various societies, influencing the dynamics of social interactions. Initially proposed by Hall (1966), the concept of *high and low contact cultures* classifies cultures based on tactile engagement and proxemic distances during communication.

Cultures characterized by rich sensory experience tend to prioritize frequent physical interactions. This inclination is evident among populations from regions like France, Italy, Latin America, the Arab world, and Africa, which are considered high-contact cultures. On the other hand, individuals hailing from countries such as the United States, Canada, northern Europe, New Zealand, and Australia are associated with moderate-contact cultures. Germans and Danes also exhibit moderate-contact tendencies, although to a lesser degree. Conversely, cultures that place less emphasis on sensory stimulation tend to require minimal personal contact. This characteristic is observed prominently in East Asian societies, including China, Japan, and Korea, which are categorized as low-contact cultures (Barnlund, 1975; Hall, 1976; Matsumoto *et al.*, 2016, as cited in Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019).

In a high-contact culture, communicators face one another directly, often look one another in the eye, interact closely with one another, often touch one another, and speak in a rather loud voice. In contrast, in a low-contact culture, interactants face one another more indirectly, interact with a wider space between them, engage in little or no touching, prefer indirect eye glances, and speak in a soft-to-moderate tone of voice. People in moderate-contact cultures have a mixture of both high-contact and low-contact nonverbal interaction characteristics (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019, p. 250).

Anderson (1997, as cited in Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019) proposes a correlation between high-contact cultures and warmer climates, while low-contact cultures are often associated with cooler regions. The author suggests that this pattern arises from the differing environmental demands and social orientations of these regions. In warmer climates, where survival is less contingent on collaborative tasks, societies tend to prioritize socioemotional connections and sensory experiences. In contrast, colder climates necessitate a greater focus on task-oriented problem-solving to address survival challenges, relegating interpersonal contact to a secondary concern.

2.1.3. Small and large power distance cultures

According to Andersen *et al.* (2013), power can be defined as “the ability to influence and control others” (p. 307). Studies on power indicate that individuals in positions of higher status are granted greater personal space, allocated larger territories, and possess the ability to encroach upon the personal space of others.

In the cultural context, *power distance* denotes the level of social inequality within a culture. This is intricately linked to the importance given to social status and authority, as well as the fairness of resource distribution within the society (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010). Culture also differs in the extent to which individuals accept inequality of power in social hierarchies and consider it normal (Hofstede 2001; Stohl 1993, as cited in Andersen *et al.*, 2013). “Thus power distance refers to the degree to which the culture believes that institutional and organizational power should be distributed unequally and the decisions of the power holders should be challenged or accepted” (Lustig & Koester, 2010, p. 114).

Power distance can be observed in different social organizations, as families, business organizations, bureaucracies, government, even in friendships. It is inevitable and sometimes essential to effective functionality. Cultures can be defined by its power distance level (Neuliep, 2021). Table 5 presents some pattern variations in interaction within social groups from different power cultures (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012).

Table 5

Value characteristics in small and large power distance (PD) cultures

Situations	Small PD cultures	Large PD cultures
General	Emphasize interpersonal equality	Emphasize status-based difference
Family	Children may contradict parents	Children should obey parents
Relationship	Younger people are smart	Older people are wise
School	Teachers ask for feedback	Teachers lecture
Workplace	Subordinates expect consultation	Subordinates expect guidance
Communication	Informal patterns	Formal patterns
Personality equivalence	Horizontal self	Vertical self

Source: Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012)

Hofstede (1980, as cited in Burgoon *et al.* 2010) introduced the term “power distance index”, referring to the level of separation, in terms of power, between co-cultures or individual members within a culture.

People in small power distance cultures tend to value equal power distributions, equal rights and relations, and equitable rewards and punishments on the basis of performance. People in large power distance cultures tend to accept unequal power distributions, hierarchical rights, asymmetrical role relations, and rewards and punishments based on age, rank, status, title, and seniority. For small power distance cultures, equality of personal rights represents an ideal to strive toward in a system. For large power distance cultures, respect for power hierarchy in any system is a fundamental way of life (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012, p. 48).

In cultures with high power distance, authoritarian structures prevail, with power and resources concentrated among a select few high-status individuals. These societies often exhibit clear distinctions between social classes – lower, middle, and upper – and are represented by countries like Philippines, Mexico, Venezuela, India, Singapore, Brazil, France, and Colombia (Hofstede, 1980, as cited in Burgoon *et al.*, 2010).

In high-power distance cultures such as these, communication functions to reinforce status differences. For example, people of lower status are likely to engage in submissive nonverbal behavior and to hide negative emotions, especially when in the presence of high-status others (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010, p. 34).

In contrast, cultures characterized by low levels of power distance tend to have more egalitarian principles, where power and resources are dispersed among various individuals and groups, resulting in fewer class distinctions. Hofstede (1980, as cited in Burgoon *et al.* 2010) indicated several nations, such as Austria, Denmark, New Zealand, Ireland, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Switzerland, and England, exemplifying the lowest power distance. In low power cultures, nonverbal communication may function to reduce status differences. For instance, individuals tend to show greater symmetry in nonverbal behavior, emphasizing similarities rather than highlighting differences in social status (Burgoon *et al.* 2010).

Observational studies attest to the fact that high-status individuals tend to adopt more open and relaxed postures, to take up more physical space, and to approach others more closely than do low-status. Low-status individuals appear to be more behaviorally restrained and to focus more on monitoring the behavior of others than do high-status individuals. Keltner and colleagues proposed that the various behaviors shown by high-power individuals could be construed as reflecting a broad approach orientation. In

contrast, low power is associated with a more inhibited orientation (Dovidio & LaFrance, 2013).

2.1.4. High and low context cultures

As outlined by Neuliep (2021), human communication is profoundly influenced by the context in which it occurs. This context encompasses a variety of factors, including cultural background, physical environment, social relationships, and individual perceptions. *Cultural context*, for instance, encompasses elements such as individualism and collectivism, while the *physical environment* denotes the actual geographical location of the interaction, whether it be an office, classroom, or bedroom, for example. The *sociorelational environment* considers the nature of the relationship between interactants. Furthermore, the *perceptual environment* encompasses the attitudes, motivations, and cognitive dispositions of those involved in the communication process. Notably, the significance attributed to these contextual factors varies considerably across cultures (Neuliep, 2021).

Hall (1981, as cited in Lustig & Koester, 2010) suggests that cultures can be categorized based on the amount of information conveyed by the setting or context of communication, regardless of the specific words articulated. The author saw context as “the information that surrounds an event; it is inextricably bound up with the meaning of the event” (Hall, 1981, as cited in Samovar *et al.* 2013, p. 201).

[...] Every human being is faced with so many perceptual stimuli – sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and bodily sensations – that it is impossible to pay attention to them all. Therefore, one of the functions of culture is to provide a screen between the person and all of those stimuli to indicate what perceptions to notice and how to interpret them (Lustig & Koester, 2010, p. 109).

Cultures vary along a spectrum from high to low context. In *high-context cultures*, communication relies heavily on implicit messages, where much of the meaning is inferred from the physical environment or assumed to be understood based on shared cultural values, beliefs, and norms. These cultures, including Japanese, African American, Mexican, and Latino cultures, provide minimal explicit information in the verbal part of the message, relying more on how something is said than what is said (Lustig & Koester, 2010; Samovar *et al.*, 2013). To fully interpret a message, individuals need to be familiar with the implicit meanings of the particular context, which can evolve

over time (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010). Japanese culture serves as a prime example of a high-context culture, as delineated by Hall (1981, as cited in Burgoon *et al.*, 2010):

[...] the Japanese glean a lot of important information about people by looking at their formal rock gardens. The Japanese also send subtle messages of respect and liking through nonverbal behaviors such as bowing, conversational distancing, and subtle facial expression. Artifacts used in Japanese ceremonies, such as teacups, tablecloths, and traditional dress, are replete with meaning (p. 35).

In contrast, *low-context cultures* predominantly convey information directly and explicitly, favoring the use of messages. Examples of such cultures include German, Swedish, European, American, and English cultures (Lustig & Koester, 2010). Unlike high-context cultures, which tend to be vague, indirect, and implicit, low-context cultures emphasize clarity and directness in verbal expression. In these cultures, individuals prioritize spoken words over nonverbal cues for message transmission, valuing the ability to articulate thoughts and ideas clearly and assertively. Moreover, credibility in communication is often associated with verbal proficiency and the ability to express oneself effectively (Samovar *et al.*, 2013). On the other hand, high-context communication emphasizes on discerning the implicit meaning behind the spoken words, to accurately infer the intended message, and to recognize the subtle nonverbal cues on verbal expression, as described in Table 6 (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019).

Table 6

Low-context (LCC) and high-context communication (HCC) framework

LCC characteristics	HCC characteristics
Individualistic values	Collectivistic values
Self-face assertive concern	Other-face and mutual-face concerns
Linear logic	Spiral logic
Direct style	Indirect style
Person-oriented style	Status-oriented style
Self-enhancement style	Self-effacement style
Speaker-oriented style	Listener-oriented style
Verbal-based understanding	Context-based understanding

Source: Ting-Toomey and Dorjee (2019)

According to Burgoon *et al.* (2010), collectivistic cultures tend to exhibit higher context communication patterns compared to individualistic cultures. Geographically, Asian countries have been predominantly classified as high-context cultures, while North American and many northern European regions as low-context cultures. Mediterranean regions use both context-based and non-context-based message systems equally. When examining cultural variations in nonverbal communication, it is important to avoid assuming that all individuals within a particular region adhere to the norms of the dominant national culture. For example, in the United States, African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Native Americans represent high-context co-cultures despite residing within the same geographic area (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010).

2.1.5. Feminine and masculine cultures

A fifth dimension regards gender expectations and individuals' preferences for either achievement and assertiveness or nurturance and social support, which Hofstede (1980, as cited in Lustig & Koester, 2010) defines as the *masculinity-femininity dimension*. This dimension indicates "the degree to which a culture values 'masculine' behaviors, such as assertiveness and the acquisition of wealth, or 'feminine' behaviors, such as caring for others and the quality of life" (Lustig & Koester, 2010, p. 118). Hofstede supports that "many masculine and feminine behaviors are learned and mediated by cultural norms and traditions" (Samovar *et al.*, 2013, p. 190). Some authors have recently used the terms 'career success' and 'quality of life' instead of masculinity and femininity, as they believe these terms better capture the complexity of this dimension (Samovar *et al.*, 2013).

According to Burgoon *et al.* (2010), in cultures characterized by a feminine orientation, gender roles tend to be more fluid, allowing for greater androgyny, and value traits traditionally associated with femininity, such as compassion, caregiving, and cooperation. Conversely, masculine cultures typically have more rigid gender roles and value traits associated with masculinity, such as ambition, strength, and competitiveness.

Cultural orientations regarding gender are linked to various aspects of a society, as "how educated men and women are, the types of occupations men and women have, and attitudes about the distribution of household labor" (Andersen, 2008, as cited in

Burgoon *et al.* 2010, p. 36). Samovar *et al.* (2013) defended that the influence of masculinity and femininity on a culture is also evident in the *gender gap*. The World Economic Forum annually conducts a survey to assess the gender gap across countries, evaluating four key categories: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. In the 2010 report, which surveyed 134 nations, Iceland, Norway, Finland, and Sweden were identified as the top four performers in political empowerment, while the United States ranked 40th, Italy 54th, Mexico 61st, and Japan 101st. These rankings generally align with findings from Hofstede's research, presented in Table 7.

Table 7

Masculinity values for fifty countries and three regions

Rank	Country	Rank	Country	Rank	Country	Rank	Country
1	Japan	15	United States	29	Israel	43	Guatemala
2/3	Austria	16	Australia	30/31	Indonesia	44	Thailand
2/3	Venezuela	17	New Zealand	30/31	West Africa	45	Portugal
4/5	Italy	18/ 19	Greece	32/33	Turkey	46	Chile
4/5	Switzerland	18/ 19	Hong Kong	32/33	Taiwan	47	Finland
6	Mexico	20/ 21	Argentina	34	Panama	48/49	Yugoslavia
7/8	Ireland	20/ 21	India	35/36	Iran	48/49	Costa Rica
7/8	Jamaica	22	Belgium	35/36	France	50	Denmark
9/ 10	Great Britain	23	Arab countries	37/38	Spain	51	Netherlands
9/ 10	Germany	24	Canada	37/38	Peru	52	Norway
11/12	Philippines	25/ 26	Malaysia	39	East Africa	53	Sweden
11/12	Colombia	25/ 26	Pakistan	40	El Salvador		
13/14	South Africa	27	Brazil	41	South Korea		
13/14	Ecuador	28	Singapore	42	Uruguay		

Source: Samovar et al. (2013)

A culture's gender orientation also influences nonverbal communication patterns significantly, as explained by Burgoon *et al.* (2010):

[...] in highly masculine cultures, women are expected to display more submissive behaviors than men and to avoid immediate interaction with men whom they do not know well. Men are expected to inhibit stereotypically feminine expressions, such as overt shows of affection or crying during a sad movie. There are also likely to be fewer sex differences in nonverbal communication in cultures or co-cultures characterized by feminine gender orientations. Importantly, in feminine cultures, both men and women have more freedom of nonverbal expression. Women can exhibit nonverbal cues reflecting power without penalty, whereas men can display nonverbal cues reflecting affection and caregiving without being seen as unmanly (pp. 36-37).

As observed by Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012), cultural values serve as repositories of wisdom transmitted across generations and offer numerous social functions, such as providing identity, meaning, explanation, motivation, and evaluation, perpetuating established communication practices and norms.

2.2. Patterns of NVC across cultures

2.2.1. Facial expressions and emotional displays

Samovar *et al.* (2013) defend that a person has three faces: the 'assigned' face, inherent from birth that, although it changes over time due to factors like age, health, and even cosmetic procedures, is essentially the 'natural' face; second, there is the manipulative face, which individuals can consciously alter as needed, like when adopting a broad smile to convey happiness upon meeting a friend; and, at last, there is the reactive face, responsive to environmental stimuli and received messages, as exemplified by involuntary blushing following a compliment.

As it was already discussed in the kinesics session, the face is capable of producing about 250,000 different expressions. Even with this large number of actions, researchers usually agree that there is relative universality in the decoding of basic facial expressions (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012).

It appears that there is consistency across cultures in our ability to recognize at least seven emotions in an individual's facial expressions. We can refer to these recognizable facial emotions by the acronym SADFISH: Sadness, Anger, Disgust, Fear, Interest, Surprise, and Happiness. People are able to recognize not only the emotion but also the intensity of emotion and often the secondary emotion being experienced (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012, p. 138).

The universality of emotional expression appears to be related only to primary emotions. LaFrance and Mayo (1978a, as cited in Burgoon *et al.*, 2010) and other researchers have observed that blended facial expressions, such as smug or sarcastic smiles, may be accurately interpreted only within specific cultural or co-cultural contexts. Izard (1971 as cited in Burgoon *et al.*, 2010) concluded that while many emotions like happiness, anger, and sadness are expressed and decoded similarly across cultures, there exist some significant cultural differences. For example, the Japanese encounter challenges in decoding expressions associated with shame, likely due to cultural norms that encourage the concealment of such emotions. In the same way, individuals from African regions may struggle to interpret facial expressions of disgust or contempt, possibly because these emotions are discouraged within their cultural framework.

Facial expressions may be more closely linked to social motives rather than the specific emotions individuals are experiencing: a smile may signify someone's inclination to affiliate with others rather than solely reflecting feelings of happiness, while an aggressive expression may indicate readiness to engage in confrontational behavior rather than simply conveying anger. This viewpoint, referred to as the *behavioral ecology view*, suggests that facial expressions serve as signals of one's intentions to others. These intentions, such as promoting group harmony or asserting individual rights, may hold varying importance across different cultural contexts, resulting in differences in facial expressions (Fridlund & Russell, 2006, as cited in Burgoon *et al.*, 2010).

According to research by Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012), these variations in how different cultures regulate the expression of emotion are known as *cultural display rules*. These rules dictate when it is appropriate or inappropriate to express certain emotions and are different depending on the norms of each culture (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010). For instance, in cultures that prioritize individualism, openly display of feelings like anger or disgust are openly accepted, whether alone or in public. On the contrary, collectivist societies often suppress expressions of anger or disgust, especially in the presence of individuals of higher social status (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012).

An interesting study suggests that, like in verbal language, people have *nonverbal accents* that allow others to distinguish the country of origin (Marsh, Elfenbein & Ambady, 2003, as cited in Burgoon *et al.* 2010):

In this study, people from the United States looked at photos of individuals from the United States and Australia. In some of the photos, people were smiling. In other photos, people had neutral expressions on their faces. The participants in this study could only differentiate between American and Australian faces when people were smiling, suggesting that the smile is somehow accented. The presence of nonverbal accents helps explain why some studies have shown an *ingroup advantage* when it comes to identifying emotional expressions. Specifically, several studies have shown that people are better at recognizing and interpreting the facial expressions of people who are from the same culture or co-culture as they are (pp. 44-45).

Expanding on this concept, scholars reveal another interesting aspect of human behavior: individuals tend to have greater accuracy, by as much as 10% to 15%, in identifying members of their own ethnic group compared to those from different backgrounds (Bothwell, 1989, as cited in Neuliep, 2021). This phenomenon, termed *own-race identification bias*, emphasizes how our exposure and familiarity with certain culture features influence our perceptions. Essentially, it underscores the importance of cultural familiarity and social experiences in shaping how individuals perceive and recognize others, highlighting the complex interplay between culture, cognition, and perception.

It is important to note that, even within a given culture, co-cultures may have distinct patterns of facial expression compared to the broader societal norms. For instance, research suggests that women, in contrast to men, tend to employ a wider range of facial expressions, demonstrating greater expressiveness and a propensity to smile more frequently; they are more inclined to reciprocate smiles; and are often attracted to individuals who smile more (Samovar *et al.*, 2013).

2.2.2. Gestures and body movements

Gestures can be considered a “nonverbal vocabulary”, which people use consciously and unconsciously to share messages (Samovar *et al.*, 2013), and provide the most tangible cross-cultural differences in nonverbal communication (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010). Ekman and Friesen (1975, as cited in Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012) classified hand gestures and body movements into four fundamental categories: *emblems*, *illustrators*, *regulators*, and *adaptors*.

Emblems are gestures that substitute for words and phrases. [...] Illustrators are nonverbal hand gestures that we use along with the spoken message – they literally illustrate the verbal message. [...] Regulators are nonverbal behaviors we use in conversation to control, maintain, or “regulate” the pace and flow of the conversation. [...] Adaptors are habits or gestures that fulfill some kind of psychological or physical need (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012).

Lustig & Koester (2010) include another category of gestures: *affect displays*.

Affect displays are facial and body movements that show feelings and emotions. Expressions of happiness or surprise, for instance, are displayed by the face and convey a person's inner feelings. Though affect displays are shown primarily through the face, postures and other body displays can also convey an emotional state (Lustig & Koester, 2010, p. 206).

Emblems are particularly important, for facilitating communication across distances and in circumstances where speech is restricted or may not be allowed (Matsumoto, 2020). Linked to verbal language, emblems have literal translations and tend to have cultural variations (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010).

A common example of a similar gesture with different cultural interpretations is the “V for victory” gesture, as shown in Figure 8. This gesture holds distinct meanings across different cultures: it may symbolize victory or peace, a sign for the number “two”, or even carry a derogatory connotation (Knapp *et al.*, 2012).

Figure 8

Cultural variations of the “V for victory” gesture



Source: Knapp *et al.* (2012)

In World War II, Winston Churchill popularized the ‘V for victory’ gesture, symbolizing triumph. However, the orientation of the hand significantly impacts its meaning: when the palm faces towards the performer, it signifies victory; yet, in Great Britain, if the palm faces inward, it transforms into a sexual insult. Interestingly, in the United States and other parts of the world, the inward facing “V” simply denotes the number two, and there is no distinction between the “V” for victory and the “V” for peace,

a gesture that emerged during the anti-Vietnam War protests in the 1960s (Knapp *et al.*, 2012).

While cultures vary significantly in their use of gestures, individuals tend to employ them in similar communication contexts. For instance, emblems and illustrators are commonly used during greetings and farewells, to convey insults or vulgarities, to indicate aggression or readiness to flee, and to denote friendly or romantic connections (Neuliep, 2021).

As pointed by Neuliep (2021, p. 509), “understanding the meanings of nonverbal gestures, especially emblems and illustrators, is a prerequisite to becoming a competent intercultural communicator”. Greetings rituals, in particular, have an important role in intercultural communicative interaction. In high-context and collectivistic cultures, greeting rituals often vary based on social hierarchy; also, gender may influence the rules for greetings in many cultures. For instance, in Korea and other Asian cultures like Japan and Vietnam, bowing is a customary form of greeting. The depth and duration of the bow may vary depending on the social status of the individuals involved. In Japan, for example, specific guidelines dictate the posture and hand positioning during a bow, with variations based on gender and social standing (Neuliep, 2021).

Considering illustrator gestures, some authors suggest that individuals from specific regions use expressive gestures more often. Arab cultures often utilize expansive gestures as a means to demonstrate engagement and convey emotions – notable among Arab women who may substitute gesturing for facial expressions, particularly when veiled. Similarly, southern European countries, as Italy, and along with regions bordering the Mediterranean Sea, are identified as expressive gestures users. This tendency aligns with broader research indicating that individuals from warmer climates tend to exhibit greater expressiveness compared to those from colder climates (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010).

Research also suggests that kinesic expressiveness is a learned behavior. For instance, although first-generation immigrants from areas such as Italy and Lithuania use highly expressive gestures similar to those used in their homeland, second-generation immigrants do not, presumably because they have been enculturated into U.S. society (Efron, 1972; Shuter, 1979, as cited in Burgoon *et al.* 2010, p 43).

In summary, understanding and interpreting gestures and body movements is essential for effective intercultural communication. These nonverbal cues are deeply rooted in cultural contexts and can significantly influence the clarity and success of personal interactions.

2.2.3. Paralanguage

Voice influences how people feel. Well beyond speech, voice contains many cultural characteristics which convey meanings (Matsumoto & Juang, 2022). These *paralinguistic features* include:

- *Accent*: how your words are pronounced together;
- *Pitch range*: your range of tone from high to low;
- *Pitch intensity*: how high or low your voice carries;
- *Volume*: how loudly or softly you speak;
- *Articulation*: if your mouth, tongue, and teeth coordinate to speak precisely or to slur your words;
- *Rate*: the speed of sound or how quickly or slowly you speak (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012, p. 137)

Each of these traits can be represented along a continuum and is interpreted by receptor's own cultural standards, values, and norms. For example, Arab cultures have a tendency towards louder speech compared to many other cultures. This is because, within Arab cultural norms, loud speech is believed to signify strength and sincerity, whereas softness in speech is often interpreted as conveying weakness or deviousness (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010). This is the reason why Arabs not rarely evaluate the speaking style in the United States as unexpressive, distant, and cold (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012), while U.S. Americans may mistakenly perceive that some Saudi Arabians as excited or angry when, in fact, they are not (Lustig & Koester, 2010).

Voice can convey certain universal emotional states across cultures. "Anger, for instance, produces a harsh edge to the voice; the voice gets louder, and speech rates increase. Disgust produces 'yuck' sounds', while fear produces higher pitch and sudden inhalations. Sadness produces softer voices and decreased speech rates" (Matsumoto & Juang, 2022, p. 240).

Proposed by Howard Giles (1973, as cited in Burgoon *et al.*, 2010), the *Communication Accommodation Theory* explains how individuals adjust their nonverbal behaviors, including vocalic cues, to accommodate cultural and co-cultural differences. This theory explains why individuals may alter their accents when interacting with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Accommodation can manifest in two ways: convergence and divergence. *Convergence* involves adapting the individual's

communication style (including facial expressions, smiling, eye contact, posture, and speech characteristics) to align more closely with that of another person or group. For instance, when visiting Japan, one may adopt customs like bowing, controlling emotional expression, and speaking softly. Oppositely, *divergence* occurs when an individual intentionally distances themselves from another person or group by emphasizing differences in communication style. This may occur when there is disapproval of certain behaviors or to assert identification with a particular ingroup (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010).

Additionally, according to Burgoon *et al.* (2010), vocalic accommodation patterns are influenced by power dynamics, with individuals of lower status or power often converging towards the communication style of those with higher status or power.

People also perceive others differently depending on which speaking styles are valued more within their culture and co-culture. For example, in a given culture, certain accents are often perceived as the most powerful and prestigious. [...] Although there is a preferred speaking style in most cultures, some co-cultural groups have distinct styles that separate them from the mainstream and help them identify with other ingroup members. These styles are generally rated lower in terms of prestige and status, but high in terms of group solidarity. So if you encounter someone who speaks in a style similar to your own, you will likely view that person as friendlier, more attractive, and more similar to yourself than someone who speaks differently than you do (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010, p. 55).

In this sense, the study of paralanguage shows the profound impact of vocal cues on interpersonal communication. As highlighted by Matsumoto and Juang (2022) and Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012), the diverse paralinguistic features, from accent to pitch intensity, serve as cultural markers that shape perceptions and interpretations across societies.

2.2.4. Eye contact and gaze

Gaze and eye behavior holds significant influence as a nonverbal cue due to its evolutionary origins in animals and its associations with various social dynamics such as dominance, power, aggression, affiliation, and nurturance in both humans and animals (Matsumoto & Juang, 2022).

Kobayashi and Kohshima (2002, as cited in Danesi, 2022) propose the “*cooperative eye hypothesis*”, suggesting that gazing behaviors among primates, including humans, have an important role in the development of visual-perceptive functions of the eye. This theory implies that the evolutionary process of the eye’s visual-perceptive mechanisms aimed to facilitate collaboration among individuals during task

completion. Tomasello *et al.* (2007, as cited in Danesi, 2022) conducted a study comparing human infants and great apes' responses to changes in gaze direction. They found that while great apes were more likely to follow the experimenter's gaze when accompanied by head movement, infants were more inclined to follow the gaze itself, irrespective of head movements. This study suggests that humans rely more instinctively on gaze cues than other nonverbal signals to interpret others' actions and intentions, discerning cooperative or conflictual intentions directly from the gaze.

Samovar *et al.* (2013) write about the fundamental role that eye contact and gaze have in human communication motivated by several reasons. Firstly, they serve as indicators of human emotions, facilitate feedback monitoring, demonstrate levels of attentiveness and interest, regulate conversational flow, influence attitude shifts, establish power dynamics and social status, and contribute to impression management. Secondly, the eyes possess significant communicative potential, capable of conveying a myriad of messages. Various descriptors such as direct, sensual, sardonic, cruel, expressive, intelligent, penetrating, sad, cheerful, worldly, hard, trusting, and suspicious are commonly used to characterize individuals' eyes. Lastly and notably, eye contact is directly linked to cultural norms and practices. Individuals, both consciously and unconsciously, assimilate the significance of eye contact and the associated rules governing its use. These societal rules and norms become particularly apparent in situations of intercultural communication.

Matsumoto and Juang (2022, p. 239) note that “cultures create rules concerning gazing and visual attention because aggression and affiliation are behavioral tendencies that are important for group stability and maintenance”, consequently, cultural norms dictate the establishment of visual contact.

As demonstrated in Table 8, cultural norms regarding eye contact can be categorized into distinct patterns, ranging from cultures characterized by “direct eye contact” to those with “nominal eye contact”. Understanding these cultural distinctions is essential for effective intercultural interactions.

Table 8

Direct and nominal eye contact cultures

Direct eye contact cultures	Nominal eye contact cultures
Middle Eastern	Korean
French	Japanese
German	African
Dominant U.S.	East Indian
Deaf co-cultures	

Source: Samovar *et al.* (2013)

Matsumoto and Juang (2022) highlights that gaze frequently serves as a nonverbal sign of respect, and the diversity of cultural norms regarding gaze results in distinct expressions of respect through this nonverbal cue.

In the many Western countries, individuals are taught to “look the other person in the eye,” or to “look at me when you’re talking.” In these cultures, direct gaze when talking is a sign of respect. In other cultures, however, gazing directly can be a sign of disrespect, and looking away or even looking down are signs of respect. These cultural differences lend themselves very easily to cultural misunderstandings (Matsumoto & Juang, 2022, p. 239).

In Arab cultures, direct eye contact between individuals of the same gender is commonly practiced and extended over prolonged durations. This intensity of visual engagement, often perceived as staring by ‘outsiders’, serves the purpose of discerning the sincerity of the interlocutor’s words, particularly among Arab males. It is noteworthy that direct eye contact between men and women is typically avoided. In different cultures across Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and regions of Africa, the act of avoiding direct eye contact is commonly regarded as a gesture of respect. This cultural norm is prevalent in parts of Africa, where maintaining eye contact with elders or individuals of higher social status is perceived as disrespectful or even confrontational, and respect typically demonstrated by lowering the eyes. Similarly, in India, the appropriateness of eye contact is heavily influenced by social standing, leading individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to abstain from direct eye contact with each other. In Egypt, where gender dynamics hold significant sway, strangers, particularly women and men, may refrain from making eye contact as a mark of modesty and adherence to religious traditions (Samovar *et al.*, 2013).

Still, according to Matsumoto and Juang (2022), stereotypes surrounding gaze also influence perceptions of deception and credibility. A prevalent belief worldwide is that individuals who avoid direct eye contact are likely to be lying. Besides empirical evidence indicates little to no support for this assumption, cultural variations exacerbate this issue, as behaviors considered respectful in some cultures, such as averting gaze as a sign of deference, may be misinterpreted as dishonesty by individuals from different cultural backgrounds.

2.3. Intercultural competence and NVC

Intercultural competence can be defined as “the capability to shift one’s cultural perspective and appropriately adapt behavior to cultural differences and commonalities” (Hammer, 2015, p. 483). This is what allows individuals to effectively navigate through cultural differences, characterized as the divergences in experiences, values, interpretations, judgments, and behaviors among people, which are acquired and assimilated from the societal groups to which one pertains.

Berger (1977, as cited in Burgoon *et al.*, 2010) affirmed that many of the differences between people can be defined as *irrelevant variety*, simply because there are many behaviors that, even though culturally interesting, have no impact on communication processes, as, for instance, if some people at a dinner reception hold the cutlery in a way different from the others.

In this sense, LaFrance and Mayo (1978b, as cited in Burgoon *et al.*, 2010) proposed a model categorizing human behavior into three layers based on their universality and diversity. At the core are innate, universally recognized nonverbal behaviors, as facial expressions of emotions. Surrounding this core are behaviors displaying both commonality and variability across cultures, such as emotional displays and signals of intimacy and status. In the last category are behaviors exhibiting significant diversity across cultures, including language-related acts, certain gestures, and personality traits.

In addition to understanding the diversity of human behavior across cultures, developing intercultural competence has become imperative in today’s interconnected world. As Hammer (2015) highlights, clichés about the global village are no longer

sufficient to justify the need for cultural understanding; instead, our daily interactions with diverse others underscore its necessity. Cultural differences now impact various aspects of our lives, from corporate success and healthcare effectiveness to military safety and educational outcomes. Consequently, cultural competence has transitioned from being a mere nicety to an essential skill set, integral to all facets of modern existence.

Moreover, intercultural communication unveils a myriad of challenges, as written by Martin and Nikayama (2022), who presented a comprehensive exploration of the barriers to intercultural interactions:

Ethnocentrism is the belief that one's own cultural group—usually equated with nationality - is superior to all other cultural groups. [...]

Stereotypes 'are widely held beliefs about a group of people' and are a form of generalization - a way of categorizing and processing information we receive about others in our daily life. [...]

Prejudice is a negative attitude toward a cultural group based on little or no experience. It is a prejudgment of sorts. Whereas stereotypes tell us what a group is like, prejudice tells us how we are likely to feel about that group. [...]

[Discrimination is] the behavior that results from stereotyping or prejudice—overt actions to exclude, avoid, or distance oneself from other groups [...] (Martin & Nikayama, 2022, pp. 55-62).

It is interesting to note that, as observed by Martin and Nakayama (2022), discriminatory practices can often elude individuals' awareness, even among those who perpetrate them. People often perceive themselves as fair and well-intentioned, yet they may fail to recognize their subtle biases due to their cultural backgrounds or social conditioning. These biases may originate from various factors, such as religion, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, or body image.

Understanding nonverbal behaviors is fundamental to improve intercultural communication competence, given that a significant portion of message meaning, around 65 percent, is inferred through nonverbal channels. As observed by Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012):

Nonverbal cues are the markers of our identities. The way we dress, the way we talk, our nonverbal gestures – these tell something about who we are and how we want to be viewed. We rely on nonverbal cues as “name badges” to identify what groups we belong to and what groups we are not a part of. All of these cues are interpreted through the mediation of stereotypes. Our accent, posture, and hand gestures further give our group membership away (p. 133).

Deciphering nonverbal cues or messages accurately requires attentive observation and comprehension of a culture. Misinterpretations often arise when attempting to discern the meanings behind nonverbal codes, particularly in cross-cultural interactions. Nonverbal communication constitutes a potent communication system, serving as the

essence of a culture. While language provides access to a culture's core, nonverbal communication encapsulates its intricate and profound meanings (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012).

Ting-Toomey and Dorjee (2019) list three main implicit standards evolving from intercultural communication competence: appropriateness, effectiveness, and adaptability. *Communication appropriateness* refers to the extent to which behaviors exchanged are considered suitable and align with the cultural expectations of insiders. To behave appropriately in a given cultural context, individuals must possess a thorough understanding of the value and norms guiding the interactional situation. *Communication effectiveness* encompasses the achievement of shared meaning and goal-related outcomes in interactions. Intercultural communicators require diverse verbal and nonverbal skills to make deliberate choices. Effective communication involves attending to multiple meanings accurately and culturally sensitively while strategically working towards desired outcomes. To behave appropriately and effectively, individuals must be mentally and behaviorally flexible. *Communication adaptability* requires adjusting interaction behaviors and objectives to suit each unique situation, demonstrating mental, emotional, and behavioral agility. Achieving behavioral adaptation requires integrating identity-aware knowledge of oneself and others, coupled with open-mindedness and genuine curiosity (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019).

3. NVC in social media

As written by Hartley (2018, p. 13), “all media are social; all sociality is mediated”. This emphasizes the interconnectedness between media and social interaction. Meikle (2016, p. 6) defines *social media* as the “networked database platforms that combine public with personal communication”. From a pragmatic perspective, the term social media distinguishes itself from other online media formats by its emphasis on high interactivity, the facilitation of user identity formation, and a willingness to share content within growing communities (Lipschultz, 2014). Social media goes beyond a single medium; instead, it constitutes a practice, or a series of practices, aimed at utilizing media in a social manner. What truly matters is not the medium itself, but how it is employed; in other words, it is not the medium, “but the way people use it to circulate information, form social worlds, and maintain social bonds” (Humphreys, 2016, p. 2).

As pointed out, social media exists within a wider context of social networking:

Similar to other social media, the overall dynamics of online social networks can be tied to centrifugal forces of globalization that are gradually bridging cultural divides. Being part of the globalization trend, the use of online social networking continues to vary due to social, cultural, and political reasons (Kurylo & Dumova, 2016, p. 2, as cited in Lipschultz, 2014, p. 23).

In this context, it becomes evident that social media networks are not just neutral technological artifacts but are deeply connected with the socio-cultural backgrounds within which they operate. Just as nonverbal communication is shaped by cultural norms and social conventions, social media platforms are molded and dependent on similar factors.

Beyond the highly interactive and increasingly mobile platforms, social networking presents a paradoxical landscape characterized by ambiguity regarding power dynamics, control mechanisms, and the emergence of social movements (Lipschultz, 2014). Participation in online spaces entails both the risk of users being scrutinized by numerous critical observers, with any inaccuracies or falsehoods swiftly challenged and exposed in the digital realm, and a concerning trend indicating that the internet, once perceived as anarchic and potentially emancipatory, is now encountering escalating efforts aimed at privatization, commercialization, control, and profiteering from online consumer activities (Hinton & Hjorth, 2013).

Within the sphere of social media, Hinton and Hjorth (2013) rise the question: the term ‘user’ refers to using or being used? In other words, are users the agents with power, or are they the subjects of control? The authors continue:

When we think about users in the context of social media, and particularly within the construct of Web 2.0, which one of these categories is most applicable? Are users the controllers, who are powerful because they can create the content in stark contrast to the powerless audience of mass media, or are users the subjects of control, as their personal information and creative and cultural labor is monitored and commodified by social media companies? (Hinton & Hjorth, 2013, p. 21).

In order to understand social media dynamics, Humphreys (2016) suggests two main models of communication: interpersonal and mass communication approaches. Due to the fact that social media encompasses not only informal interactions among individuals but also the potential for disseminating these interactions to a wider audience, it is important to consider both perspectives as instrumental in elucidating the dynamics of social communication.

Interpersonal approach refers to “communication that is primarily based on the face-to-face dynamics of two people (or what we call dyadic communications)” (Humphreys, 2016, p. 286). This perspective, created by Erving Goffman, argues that in social interactions individuals are constantly seeking information from others and testing their predictions based on the information received, this expectation is called normative self-disclosure. There is also an anticipation for individuals to casually provide basic information, prompting a reciprocal response (Goffman, 1959, as cited in Humphreys, 2016). Considering these same norms, within digital communication, raises questions about the level and type of disclosure shared before the request, and whether sufficient information has been exchanged to establish trust and rapport.

Interpersonal communication stresses relational norms, or informal rules that govern communicative behavior between people. For instance, the norm of reciprocity suggests that there should be a give and take in a conversation; it is rude if one party monopolizes the discourse. This norm, called turn-taking, holds in almost all casual face-to-face communication. Many of the interpersonal norms in face-to-face communication structure online communication as well. [...] In face-to-face interactions and online, these norms can vary slightly because of the frequency of communication and the familiarity with the partner. They are also influenced by gender, with women performing them more than men, a difference that is also found in offline communication (Humphreys, 2016, p. 8).

However, beyond the similarities, there are some differences in social media norms. For instance, online anonymity is more widely accepted compared to real-life interactions (Humphreys, 2016).

Contrasting with interpersonal communication, *mass communication's theories* aim to explain the collective behaviors of individuals, whether they are users or providers of media content. These theories were crafted to comprehend how organizations communicate with a broad, diverse audience. Channels and institutions facilitating the transmission of information between producers and audiences are commonly categorized as forms of mass communication. Unlike interpersonal settings, mass communication is predominantly observed in public contexts (Humphreys, 2016).

In the traditional mass communication model, a message is produced by a source, encoded in media through is send to receiver who provides feedback. This model has been refined to explain how mass media influence the general public. For example, the *two-step flow theory* suggests that media influence opinion leaders, who then influence a broader audience. This implies that media organizations may indirectly influence information through gatekeepers (Humphreys, 2016). In the *social media model*, this works differently: the communication model is seen as a network comprising platforms and users. Users interact directly with each other and through platforms, while the content on these platforms is generated by various users. Unlike traditional models, information does not flow in a single direction from sender to receiver. Instead, everyone has the potential to be both a source and a receiver (Humphreys, 2016).

Thus, there are at least three key significant distinctions between traditional and social media models. Firstly, the audience is not merely passive but frequently active, engaging in curating information, offering collective interpretations of texts, and evaluating others' content. Secondly, the audience is not just potentially more active but also potentially much more specialized. Lastly, online communication may afford the audience's greater ownership or control over messages and channels due to lower production and sharing costs (Humphreys, 2016).

Communication model for social media lies somewhere between the mass media and interpersonal approaches. The "audience" members can potentially be the source or the receiver. The audience not only is passive, but also can be active. The audience is not simply productive, but also produces with an eye toward their own audience. The means of production or the means of communication are often distributed more widely. Users are networked, and the network may produce content collaboratively. To be clear, it is not that mass media no longer exists. As a relatively powerful set of actors, mass media institutions are still relevant and important for understanding communication. However, our previous understanding of communication is now supplemented with, and embedded in, the world of social media, a world in which more people actively participate in producing and disseminating information (Humphreys, 2016, p. 13).

The renowned communication theorist Marshall McLuhan expounded upon several foundational theories in his studies, many of which bear relevance to contemporary social media despite predating the internet era. Among his most renowned theories is the concept of the ‘global village’, introduced in 1964. Interesting to note that, in resonance with the theoretical framework proposed by McLuhan, is the concept of *extended nonverbal communication* (ENVC), as elucidated by Danesi (2022, p. 168):

McLuhan’s most elaborate presentation of the notion of extension is in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964). In it, he suggested that our mass media and mass communications societies have reconfigured the ways in which we understand things - hence his phrase “the medium is the message.” In themselves, media bear no meanings; but they create a new environment for them to ferment and coalesce. He used the example of a light bulb to illustrate this point. A light bulb has no meaning or content in the way that, say, a book has chapters, a newspaper has sections, or a television channel has programs. Nevertheless, it enables people to see in the dark and thus creates a physical environment in which they can carry out activities involving sight. These would not be possible without the bulb. As he remarked: “a light bulb creates an environment by its mere presence”.

McLuhan’s perspective posits that humans have ingeniously crafted tools and technologies to augment their sensory, physical, expressive, and intellectual capacities. These tools, ranging from simple implements to complex innovations, extend beyond the limitations of the human body, enhancing various aspects of communication and interaction. Similarly, social media platforms act as extensions of interpersonal communication, allowing individuals to transcend geographical barriers. Moreover, technological innovations not only extend individual capacities but also shape social norms and behaviors (McLuhan, 1962; 1964, as cited in Danesi, 2022).

3.1. Nonverbal cues in social media

Times have indeed changed. According to Küster, Krumhuber and Kappas (2015), currently, a significant portion of the global population engages in computer-mediated communication (CMC) as part of their daily routine, with certain areas experiencing near-universal adoption.

Küster, Krumhuber and Kappas (2006) write that a significant body of theoretical and empirical work suggests that CMC diverges from face-to-face (FtF) interaction primarily due to the absence of nonverbal cues in the digital medium. Consequently, it has been argued that CMC lacks social richness and has limited value and can lead to ambiguity and miscommunication. However, as a result of people’s enthusiasm for digital

social interaction, developers have continually devised richer means for communication (Baym, 2015). In recent years, there has been significant progress in integrating visuals into CMC, which includes advancements ranging from static avatars to dynamic avatars, immersive virtual interactions, and notably, face-to-face communication over the Internet through widely used platforms (Küster *et al.*, 2015).

As Burgoon and Walther (2013) note, the history of mediated communication research underscores the importance of nonverbal communication in our understanding of human interaction across different communication modalities. Moreover, additional cues such as video, images, and voice to further enhance communication can contribute to a more efficient nonverbal communication process (Baym, 2015).

Indeed, while early conceptions of computer-mediated communication emphasized its limitations in conveying the richness of face-to-face interaction, contemporary research highlights the evolution and integration of nonverbal cues within digital platforms (Küster *et al.*, 2006). With the advent of multimedia technologies and the widespread adoption of social media, users are afforded a diverse array of communicative modalities beyond text-based interaction alone. As emphasized by Baym (2015), the incorporation of visual and auditory elements such as images, videos, and voice messages has expanded the repertoire of nonverbal cues available in digital environments. These additional modalities not only facilitate the expression of emotion and intention but also enhance the overall communicative experience by providing context and nuance to online interactions.

The richness of CMC can be attributed in part to the fact that users employ the verbal characteristics of CMC to convey the relational information that would normally have been expressed through nonverbal cues. CMC users also make conscious decisions to include nonverbal cues in their communication, including emoticons, irregular capitalization, hyperbolic punctuation (e.g., !!!), and visual information from profile pictures and other photos (Fleuriet, Cole & Guerrero, 2014, p. 431).

In Figure 9, an example demonstrates how multimedia components are employed on social media platforms. The image corresponds to a post on the well-known social media platform Instagram, which provides a range of features enabling the transmission of nonverbal cues. Among these features are image and video posting, recording, and sending of audio messages, utilization of emojis and other paratextual elements, as well as interactions among users. These elements contribute to a communication environment rich in nonverbal cues, enhancing the interaction experience on social media platforms.

Figure 9

Example of post on Instagram with interaction elements



Source: Havaianas (2024)

Moreover, the asynchronous nature of many social media interactions allows users to engage in strategic self-presentation by curating their online profiles and selectively sharing content to convey desired impressions (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2011). From carefully crafted profile pictures to meticulously curated timelines, individuals leverage nonverbal cues to construct and maintain their digital identities, often with strategic objectives in mind. Consequently, the study of nonverbal communication in social media extends beyond mere observation of observable behaviors to encompass an analysis of the underlying processes of impression management, self-disclosure, and social influence (Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

In this context, Eaves and Leathers (2018) present the concept of impression management in social media, which occurs in two stages, impression formation and impression management. *Impression formation* denotes the process by which social perceptions are shaped and molded, influenced by the observed behaviors within a given social context. Usually, nonverbal impressions are based on four main sections: stereotypes, first impressions, selective perceptions, and last impressions. On the other

hand, *impression management* “may be seen as an actor’s behavioral strategy designed to create some beneficial image of presentation for the individual” (Edinger & Patterson, 1983, p. 43, as cited in Eaves & Leathers, 2018, p. 239). The impression manager seeks to consciously regulate the impression left on the interacting individual.

As previously mentioned, the affordances of social media platforms also enable users to manipulate various aspects of their online identity and self-presentation, thereby influencing perceptions of credibility, trustworthiness, and social attractiveness (Tong *et al.*, 2008). For example:

Profile pictures often contain important nonverbal information, including how physically attractive someone is. Considerable research has shown that people usually have more positive impressions of those they regard as physically attractive versus unattractive. Thus, some scholars contend that physical attractiveness is a form of nonverbal communication because people routinely attach meaning to it (Fleuriet *et al.*, 2014, p. 432).

In the same hand, as presented by Rumbough (2001, as cited in Knapp *et al.*, 2012), out of 1,000 college students surveyed, 37 percent utilized the Internet for meeting new people, while only 11 percent chose to post a picture of themselves. “Without a picture, students did not have to deal with visual cues that might act as a distraction or source of a stereotype – for example, weight, race, or physical attractiveness – that might hinder message credibility and relationship development” (Rumbough, 2001, as cited in Knapp *et al.*, 2012, p. 417).

Another form of online self-presentation used in social media are the *avatars*. According to Küster *et al.* (2015, p. 283), avatars “can be abstract, cartoonish, or somewhat anthropomorphic but do not depend on photos” and offer a number of possibilities for the study of nonverbal behavior that would be difficult to realize with other tools. Firstly, the avatar itself can communicate characteristics such as age, gender, facial expressions, and even socioeconomic status. Also, the style and content of the posts associated with the avatar can also convey nonverbal information. For example, elements of travel or social events (Figure 10) may indicate interests and hobbies, while sharing work-related content may suggest professionalism and focus.

Figure 10

Examples of avatars created for Facebook (left), dating (middle), and discussion forum (right) conditions



Source: Küster *et al.* (2015)

Furthermore, social media users have additional tools beyond words to incorporate nonverbal elements into their written messages. One such tool is capital letters, or *capitalization*, serving as a similar function to vocalic cues by providing hints on how to interpret a message's tone or emphasis. Research by Walther (2005, as cited in Fleuriet *et al.*, 2014) has demonstrated that using all capital letters can be effective in conveying emotions in instant messaging. Riordan and Kreuz (2010, as cited in Fleuriet *et al.*, 2014) further discovered that recipients often perceive capitalization as indicating heightened emotion. However, messages entirely composed in capital letters may carry a negative connotation, although there are instances where they can convey enthusiasm or emphasis positively. Nevertheless, in situations where the emotional tone of an email is unclear, the use of all capital letters tends to create a more negative impression of the sender.

Similarly, the utilization of repeated punctuation within a CMC environment can serve a similar purpose as *hyperbolic punctuation* (Walther, 2005, as cited in Fleuriet *et al.*, 2014), functioning as a quasi-vocalic cue. Research indicates that:

people have been found to use repeated punctuation (e.g., !!!!!) as an effective means of communication during synchronous mediated interaction. Senders often use repeated punctuation such as multiple exclamation points or question marks to emphasize a point or to create a stronger effect (Fleuriet *et al.*, 2014, p. 434).

It is important to mention that *interactivity* in social media platforms also represents an important form of nonverbal cue, enhancing the richness of online communication. As users engage with content through likes, shares, and comments, they convey sentiments, attitudes, and intentions without relying solely on verbal expressions. These interactive behaviors contribute to the formation of social impressions, influencing how users perceive each other and the content shared within the digital space. By participating in these interactive activities, individuals not only express themselves but also establish connections and reinforce social bonds within the online community (Meikle, 2016).

3.2. Emotional expression through nonverbal elements

Social media have facilitated access for users to develop social relationships, seeking social connections and communication opportunities, and have also intensified the frequency of communication with others (Candrasari, 2021).

Countering the notion that nonverbal cues are absent from CMC, emerging technologies selectively introduce additional cues into communicative exchanges among individuals who do not meet face-to-face. Whether implemented by users or technology designers, these advancements and their impacts inform principles of nonverbal communication (Küster *et al.*, 2006).

Interestingly, encompassing the development of social media platforms, new forms of nonverbal expression have emerged. Emoticons, emojis, and GIFs, for instance, have become ubiquitous tools for conveying affective states and interpersonal dynamics in digital communication (Derks, Bos & Von Grumbkow, 2008). Despite their simplicity, these symbolic representations serve as potent substitutes for facial expressions, gestures, and vocal intonations, effectively bridging the gap between text-based discourse and real-time interaction.

3.2.1.1. Emoticons

The term *emoticons*, originating from a combination of ‘emotion’ and ‘icons’, denotes graphical symbols commonly used alongside textual computer-mediated

communication. The incorporation of graphic symbols into written text emerged in CMC in 1982, when the classic rotated smiley face ‘:-)’ and its counterpart, the “frowny” face ‘:-(’, were introduced by Scott Fahlman, a computer scientist at Carnegie Mellon University. Fahlman proposed these symbols as a way to denote humor or seriousness in messages shared on a computer science discussion forum (Dresner & Herring, 2010).

Because the use of e-mail eliminates visual cues such as head nodding, facial expressions, posture, and eye contact found in FtF communication, CMC users often incorporate emoticons as visual cues to augment the meaning of textual electronic messages” (Rezabek & Cochenour, 1998, pp. 201-202, as cited in Walther, 2006, p. 469).

Facial expressions in FtF interactions are often spontaneous and voluntary, whereas emoticons in CMC environments are consciously chosen. However, despite their deliberate nature, emoticons serve as a visually striking method to convey expression of emotion (Derks *et al.*, 2008, as cited in Fleuriet *et al.*, 2014).

It is relevant to note the emoticons’ effectiveness within the communication process. While Ekman and Friesen (1975, as cited in Walther, 2006) reported agreement percentages ranging from 97% for happiness to 67% for anger when associating facial photos with basic human emotions, Walther and D’Addario (2001, as cited in Walther, 2006) found that emoticons, such as ‘:)’ and ‘:(’, achieved 98% consensus for happiness and sadness, respectively.

Other research on the impact of emoticons on emotion interpretation demonstrate that individuals exposed to the wink emoticon interpreted the message as seductive (85.4%), humorous (66.2%), secretive (88.7%), and sarcastic (84.1%) (Walther & D’Addario, 2001, as cited in Fleuriet *et al.*, 2014). Consequently, messages featuring a wink-face emoticon may be perceived as more ambiguous or even threatening compared to those relying solely on text.

3.2.1.2. Emojis

Despite the apparent similarity between the terms emoticon and *emoji*, they are actually distinct concepts. As mentioned before, while ‘emoticon’ is an abbreviation of ‘emotion’ and ‘icon’, ‘emoji’ is a Japanese term meaning ‘face character/letter/mark’. Additionally, in Japanese the term ‘kaemoji’ refers to what would be known as emoticons

in the West graphic representations, composed of punctuation marks and other typographical characters (Schandorf, 2019).

Early research on emoji often fails to differentiate between emoji and emoticons, commonly using the term ‘emoticon’ to refer to both. This mistake likely stems from the assumption that emoji serve the same discursive purposes as emoticons, and because of the fact that many of the earliest emoji were perceived as graphic representations of familiar emoticons. Even today, in certain systems, typing ‘:)’ may automatically generate ‘☺’ in texts, demonstrating the close association between the two. However, as emojis have become more prevalent, the employment of the term emoji has increasingly been used to encompass not only emoticons but also any graphical or iconic para-linguistic elements of digital discourse. This broader usage may extend to memes and animated gifs, which are often assumed to fulfill similar discursive functions (Schandorf, 2019).

According to Li and Wang (2023):

With the development of social media, emojis have become more and more popular due to their interestingness and convenience. A report from Emoji Research Team reveals that 92% of the online population were using emojis, and heavy users of mobile communication used emojis in 56% of their messages, while light users and medium users used them in 37 and 49% messages, respectively. Similarly, Adobe also reported that 62% of emoji users use emojis to make conversations more fun in the USA, and 91% use emojis to show their attitude in the conversation (p. 324).

Danesi (2017) notes that emojis often convey more than the literal interpretation of their individual components, reflecting belief systems, ideologies, and worldviews and offering valuable insights into how people derive meaning from their interactions. Analyzing the discourse functions and usage patterns of emojis in specific text messages allows us to understand their contributions to digital exchanges and the implications thereof. The author conducted research with 323 texts provided by informants between eighteen and twenty-two years of age and notes that the *phatic*¹ function of emoji use is the most prominent.

In other words, emoji usage seems to constitute, above all else, a visually based version of “small talk” that is used typically for establishing social contact and for keeping the lines of communication open and pleasant. [...] So, for example, a smiley used at the beginning of a text message provides a basis on which to present such a face and to imbue the tone of the message with positivity, thus ensuring that bonding between the interlocutors is maintained (Danesi, 2017, p. 19).

¹ “Any message designed to establish, acknowledge, or reinforce social relations, or else to be part of some ritualistic or performative speech situation” (Danesi, 2022, p. 6).

Additionally, the author explains the three main phatic functions of emoji:

- *Utterance opener*: it serves as a replacement for traditional opening salutations like “Hi!”, allowing the sender to convey a positive demeanor and infuse the message with a cheerful tone or mood. These emojis are designed to strengthen or maintain friendly rapport between individuals, particularly in messages that may contain some negative content;
- *Utterance ending*: to mitigate this risk of ending occurring abruptly, and convey a sense of rejection or dismissal to the recipient, emojis commonly function as a sign-off;
- *Silence avoidance*: in face-to-face conversations, silence is often interpreted as uncomfortable or awkward, prompting individuals to fill these “silence gaps” with small talk. Similarly, in CMC, placing emojis in these gaps aims to alleviate any discomfort that may arise from prolonged silence in digital exchanges (Danesi, 2017).

Danesi (2017) also presented research revealing that emojis are primarily used to convey emotivity and maintain phatic cohesion. The research was based on an overall analysis of the 323 texts provided by informants. The statistics were compiled by classifying the function of each emoji in a text as either phatic (88%), emotive (94%), or other function (64%). The emotive function of emoji can be still subdivided into two categories: (1) as substitutes for facial expressions in face-to-face communications or their corresponding graphic punctuation marks in written communications, and (2) to visually emphasize a viewpoint.

For instance, Figure 11 illustrates how the use of drink emojis provides a striking example. The insertion of four emoji signs representing different alcoholic beverages after the phrase “I drink!!!!” extends beyond mere illustration; rather, it offers a glimpse into the sender’s mindset and attitude towards drinking. Additionally, the combination of the coffee emoji with the disappointed face emoji forms a self-contained expression, conveying the sender’s disappointment that coffee was not the selected beverage (“Oops” = “I should have had coffee instead”) (Danesi, 2017).

Figure 11

Text message



Source: Danesi (2017)

It is interesting to point out that Novak *et al.* (2015, as cited in Li & Wang, 2023) conducted a text-based analysis of emojis' sentiment and investigated potential cultural variations in emoji usage. They used 83 annotators to analyze the polarities of 1.6 million tweets across 13 European languages and developed a sentiment lexicon containing the polarities of the 751 most frequently used emojis. Their findings showed no significant differences in emoji sentiment rankings across different languages, suggesting a cross-cultural consistency in the hedonic expressions conveyed by emojis.

3.3. Branding and nonverbal communication

Nonverbal communication has been utilized and studied across various fields and perspectives, including business branding. According to Aaker (2014), branding is the process of shaping the perception of a product or company in the consumer's mind, primarily through the use of brand identity elements like logos, names, and symbols, alongside the overarching marketing strategy.

Traditionally, brands have employed various strategies to strengthen their corporate image among their audiences. A remarkable experience with a particular brand can be shaped by sensory elements, which use appropriate symbols in contact with their consumers (Gobé, 2009). The term ‘*sense*’ is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “any of the faculties, such as sight, hearing, smell, taste or touch, by which humans and animals perceive stimuli originating from outside or inside the body” (Gains, 2014, p. 28). Our senses intake approximately 11 million bits of information every second, yet we are consciously aware of only about 40 bits of that information, which means that the vast majority of those 11 million bits are processed without our conscious awareness (Van Praet, 2012).

As mentioned by Gobé (2009), sensory elements can offer consumers a rich and imaginative shopping experience, as Charles Osgood referred to as *associative hierarchies*.

Although product satisfaction certainly constitutes one important experiential component – the stream of associations that occur during consumption (imagery, daydreams, emotions) are equally important aspects of consumer behavior. Most consumers are not even conscious of the effects these stimuli have on them. [...] Successful sensory appeals only occur through intelligent strategy (Gobé, 2009, p. 109).

The significance of each of the five primary senses on the overall impact of a brand is estimated in Table 9. The table shows the importance of sight and hearing compared to the other senses. Important to note that regardless of the relative importance attributed to each sense, it is imperative to acknowledge that they are not discrete and independent systems (Gains 2014).

Table 9

Relative importance of the five main senses on a brand impact

<i>Sense</i>	<i>Relative importance</i>
Eyes (visual)	83.0%
Ears (acoustic)	11.0%
Nose (olfactory)	3.5%
Skin/movement (tactile/kinesthetic)	1.5%
Tongue (gustatory)	1.0%

Source: Bronner and Hirt (2009, as illustrated in Gains, 2014)

Senses are interconnected, responding to the brain stimulation. In his research, Ramachandran (as cited in Van Praet, 2012) shows that visual sense and emotional recognition are strongly connected; as people rely so heavily on emotional reactions to the world around, emotions often prevail over visual perceptions. Consequently, branding depends on creating an emotional bond with consumers.

[...] Emotions and sensory perception are intricately connected. In order to make sense of our experiences we need to assign them value through our emotions. [...] Likewise, brands lose relevance when they fail to connect emotionally with people, and without that emotional attachment they can be easily replaced with generic imposters (Van Praet, 2012, p. 104).

In the contemporary age, with online social media, branding also “involves both purposeful online communication and also recognition of critical moments when the best choice is silence” (Lipschultz, 2014, p. 145). The social media offer a powerful opportunity for brands connect, engage, and reinforce relationships with audiences, fostering a bond that relies on emotional connection. In this context, nonverbal communication emerges as an important tool to evoke and activate emotional responses, facilitating a deeper and more meaningful connection between brands and their audiences.

3.3.1. Visual identity and brand consistency

As previously mentioned, visual sense has a significant role in communication process, as it helps in creating an immediate and intuitive connection with the audience. The world is full of meanings, which people can extract from different origins, even the most ordinary object may represent a symbol. In this sense, it is important to mention the use of *semiotics*, which is “both a science and an art, with basic principles and structured approaches that help brands decode meanings” (Gains, 2014, p. 75), or even simpler, the *study of signs*.

Semiotics helps to understand the meaning of things in the world, including “colors, shapes, logos, fonts, materials, graphic devices, packaging and sounds” (Gains, 2014, p. 75). According to Saussure, in his 1916 Course in General Linguistics, each *sign* is divided into two components: “*signified* is what the sign represents or refers to, known as the ‘plane of content’, and *signifier* which is the ‘plane of expression’ or the observable aspects of the sign itself. [...] For Saussure, the signified and signifier are purely psychological: they are *form* rather than *substance*” (Wikipedia, n.d.).

In semiotics, gold is a *signifier*, attached to many meanings (*signified*), such as wealth, extravagance and divinity. Put together, the *signifier* (gold) and the *signified* (meanings) create a sign. A key principle of semiotics is that culture turns all signs into coded symbols full of meaning (Gains, 2014, p. 78).

In the branding context, the set of meanings created for brand through the systematic association of various signifiers which represents its *visual identity*, including logos, color schemes, typography, imagery, and design style, can be defined as a *signification system* (Beasley & Danesi, 2002). The visual identity has implicit *signifieds* related to personality, lifestyle, desires, and other brand attributes. According to Hagtvedt and Patrick (2008), visual elements are integral to brand perception, affecting how consumers recognize and relate to a brand.

Visual identity serves as the first point of contact between a brand and its audience, which include also social media platforms. As visual identity encapsulates the brand's personality, values, and promise, it makes the brand instantly recognizable among the huge amount of content that users encounter daily. A strong visual identity helps in creating a cohesive and memorable brand image, which is crucial for building trust and loyalty among consumers (Keller, 2013). Visual cues, such as color and design consistency, facilitate quicker recognition and recall, contributing significantly to consumer engagement and brand equity (Lurie & Mason, 2007).

According to Beasley and Danesi (2002), within the marketing field there are three primary strategies used today to enhance visual recognizability: *repetition*, *positioning*, and *image creation*. *Repetition* refers to capturing the attention of prospective customers through repeated manifestations; *positioning* involves targeting the brand through appropriate advertising to reach the right audience of consumers; and *image creation* is achieved by generating a system of signification for the brand that makes it appealing to specific types of consumers. Although these strategies were developed long before the advent of social media, they remain highly applicable and effective, especially considering that “consistency is built on repetition” (Wheeler, 2009, p. 27), even in the digital age.

A brand identity program encompasses a unique visual language that will express itself across all applications. Regardless of the medium, the applications need to work in harmony. The challenge is to design the right balance between flexibility of expression and consistency in communications (Weeler, 2009, p. 142).

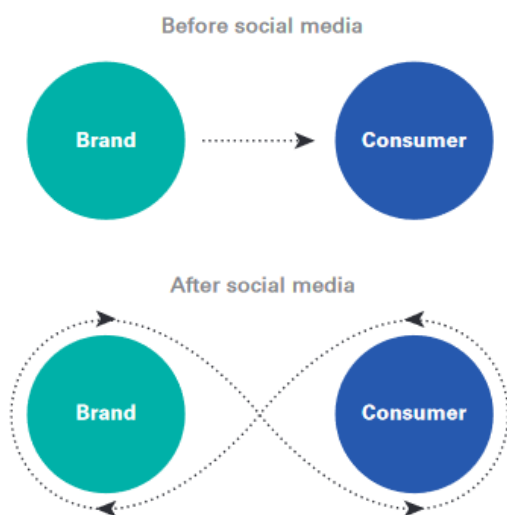
Aaker (2014) defends that consistency in visual identity allows a brand to build recognition and trust over time. Visual elements such as logos, color schemes, and design styles need to remain uniform across all media to create a cohesive and memorable brand image. This uniformity ensures that the brand message is clear and recognizable for the audience. Maintaining a consistent visual identity not only helps in reinforcing the brand's core values and personality but also fosters loyalty and trust among users, making it easier and to sustain a strong brand position.

3.3.2. Brand communication in social media

The advent of social media has revolutionized brand communication practices, enabling brands to engage directly with their target audiences in real-time conversations (Hanna *et al.*, 2011). Unlike traditional media channels, social media platforms facilitate two-way communication (as can be observed in Figure 12), allowing brands to listen, respond, and interact with consumers in a dynamic and interactive manner (Wheeler, 2009).

Figure 12

Social media two-way communication

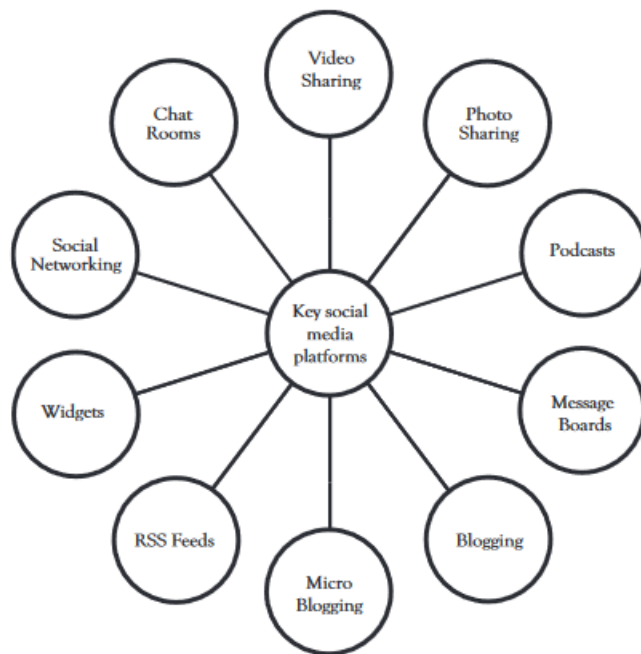


Source: Wheeler (2019)

Brand communication in social media extends beyond the mere broadcasting of messages: its primary objective is to use social media tools to reach a specific target audience and foster engagement, social sharing, and advocacy among customers. Social media encompasses various forms, such as blogs, chat rooms, social networking sites, photo and video sharing, and podcasts, as illustrated in Figure 13. Each platform serves a distinct role in a social media communication campaign, depending on the customer's location and the company's strategy, website, and brand objectives (Zahay, 2015).

Figure 13

The proliferation of social platforms



Source: Zahay (2015)

In order to build an impactful and strong online presence, brands need to develop digital capability involving online communication, such as websites, social media, and online video. According to Aaker (2014), digital communication stands out as an especially potent force for brands and brand building, as it:

- **Engages.** Digital programs, especially those that involve a community, often stimulate comments and recommendations. An engaged audience will be susceptible to listening, learning, believing, and behavior change as compared to having only passive exposures to an advertisement or seeing the name of a sponsor at an event. [...]
- **Allows content to be rich and deep.** Social media is not limiting in terms of content. A website can contain an enormous amount of information, and a four-minute video can tell a story with depth.
- **Targets.** Most digital modalities can target even to the level of an individual. A visitor to a website, for example, can tailor the experience to his or her needs.
- **Garners trust.** Compared to paid media television or print ads, website content and online customer opinions have a higher level of trust because more content implies substance and because the ‘selling objective’ is less apparent (Aaker, 2014, p. 134).

Analyzing brand communication in social media through the lens of NVC, as discussed by Burgoon and Walther (2013), reveals the significance of nonverbal cues and their dynamic nature in different media contexts. While face-to-face communication allows for the exchange of multiple nonverbal cues, mediated communication often lacks the richness of sensory channels, leading to the filtering out of certain nonverbal modalities. This underscores the importance of recognizing how nonverbal elements are transmitted and interpreted across social media platforms, where interactions predominantly occur through text, images, and emojis. Comprehending these cues becomes essential for brands effectively engaging with audiences.

3.3.2.1. Social media content

Achieving success in the social media requires engaging across multiple platforms, integrating marketing communications, and producing high-quality content (Aaker, 2014).

Social media is fueled by content. Only if the content is entertaining, functional, furthers an agenda, or resonates with an interest area will it be transmitted. And consumers often generate much of social media content. Of 150 million views of Coca-Cola related content, fewer than 20 percent were generated by the firm. An implication is that a brand should create content that will be spread by the social media world. Another is that when content does get created by the marketplace that is on-brand, its dissemination should be encouraged (Aaker, 2014, p. 144).

The term ‘social media’ encapsulates the shift in Internet content production and consumption from being primarily controlled by traditional media and publishing institutions to being driven by the participation and interaction of its users (Kelly-Holmes, 2016).

According to Humphreys (2016), social media engages audiences more actively compared to traditional or mass media forms of the past. In this sense, it is interesting to mention that, in addition to the content shared by users and created by brands, social media has enabled another phenomenon to occur. *User-generated content* (UGC) refers to any form of content, such as images, videos, text, and audio, that has been posted by users on online platforms (Walter & Gioglio, 2014). An example of UGC can be found in Figure 14, which showcases an image submitted by a consumer of Havaianas Flip Flops and Sandals.

Figure 14

User-generated content from Havaianas brand



Source: Havaianas Europe (2024)

This type of content is essential in brand communication, as it serves as authentic social proof, enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of a brand. According to Bazaar Voice (as cited in Walter & Gioglio, 2014), 51% of Americans trust user-generated content over other information on a company website. More than ever, users are engaging with brands as an active part, rather than just passive consumers.

As noted in the previous chapter, visual sense is one of the most powerful tools for brand communication, making ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’ more pertinent

than ever. Marketers are increasingly turning to visuals to enhance social media engagement for compelling reasons. As presented by Walter and Gioglio (2014), “visuals are processed 60,000 times faster than text by the human brain and 90% of information transmitted to the brain is visual. Humans evolved over millennia to respond to visual information long before they developed the ability to read text” (p.16).

As visual creatures, we are inherently wired to respond more strongly to visuals than to words. In this context, an effective strategy employed by brands is *visual storytelling*, which can be defined as “the use of images, videos, infographics, presentations, and other visuals on social media platforms to craft a graphical story around key brand values and offerings” (Walter & Gioglio, 2014, p. 8). When these contents align with consumers’ desire to consume and share relatable and interesting content, the ‘show, don’t tell’ approach takes effect, aiming to generate greater engagement, conversation, and sharing among users and brands. An exemplary instance of this approach is the *Dove Real Beauty* campaign². This campaign challenged societal beauty standards by showcasing the stark contrast between how women perceive themselves and how others perceive them. The visual storytelling approach captured viewers’ attention and encouraged them to share the content with others.

3.3.2.2. Social media marketing and advertising

Social media can play an important marketing role for businesses, much beyond simply offering a new communication channel. Social media platforms have become integral parts of modern communication, shaping not just our consumer choices but also our values, attitudes, and self-perceptions (Knapp *et al.*, 2012). As part of their communication strategy, companies can incorporate social media tools and practices to develop engaging and innovative methods for capturing consumer attention and fostering emotional connections (Humphreys, 2016).

² Available on: https://youtu.be/rrHoDJinMQI?si=ZmzdKm_tOTxH7hBm.

All kinds of organizations – from universities, to churches, to charities and museums – engage in marketing and nonprofit groups have similarly used social media as a communication tool to reach new and different audiences including potential donors and advocates, a concept called social marketing. [...] Both commercial and noncommercial organizer have developed specialized ways of using social media to communicate with customers (Humphreys, 2016, pp. 188-189).

By definition, several scholars have embraced the concept of advertising as persuasive communication. In a conventional communication model, the sender (advertiser) *encodes* a message via a *media* meant to be *decoded* by the receiver (consumer). Yet, in a networked communication model such as that seen in social media, the process becomes less defined. Firstly because, as mentioned previously, both sender and receiver have an important role in communicating in a two-way process. Secondly, the nature of the media is different, offering multiple communication channels online. And lastly, social media communication differs in the nature of influencing, as consumers communicate not only with the company, but also with other consumers (Humphreys, 2016).

One approach to addressing this differentiation is recognizing that the primary role of advertising remains *informing and persuading*, even though communication processes have evolved. The internet also enables consumers to actively seek out brand information. “When company conveys a message to the consumer, we call this *push marketing* whereas when consumers seek out information about a company, we call this *pull marketing*” (Humphreys, 2016, p. 190).

Scholars categorize media coverage into paid, owned, and earned media. *Paid media* involves purchasing time or space on an established channel, like social media ads. *Owned media*, on the other hand, pertains to advertising on channels owned by the company itself, including a company’s social media profiles and website. At last, *earned media* refers to media coverage generated by external sources, which can be social media-related, like a mention on Twitter or Instagram (Humphreys, 2016).

Most of what we consider social media would be classified as earned media. In most contexts, earned media is the most persuasive and usually the cheapest form of communication, but also the hardest to control. It seems more authentic than paid or owned media because it comes from a source other than the company, which has an obvious bias in conveying information. Testimonials from other consumers such as those posted on social network sites also lend credibility to the message because the source is probably more like you. [...] Social media can also reach audiences that traditional media would not otherwise reach, and these audiences are defined by more specialized interests (Humphreys, 2016, p. 191).

Nonverbal cues prevalent in social media communication also play an important role in its persuasive process, echoing the broader influence of media discussed by Knapp

et al. (2012). Just as traditional media shape values and attitudes, social media platforms wield significant power in molding perceptions and behaviors, often subtly and without direct purchase intent.

In advertising, nonverbal information accounts for an overwhelming amount of the total message, especially if we include information provided by settings, backgrounds, props, possessions, clothes, hair, makeup, music, and physical and group characteristics of the people shown in addition to nonverbal behavior such as facial expression, tone of voice, and body movements. The nonconscious impact rests more on the nature and juxtaposition of these images and sounds than on what is actually said. As we all know, the verbal messages contained in advertisements are often silly, irrelevant, meaningless, or not likely to promote distinctive associations to the product. Yet the message can be powerful indeed (Knapp *et al.*, 2012, p. 397).

Knapp *et al.* (2012) still highlight how nonverbal information constitutes a substantial part of the persuasive message conveyed through social media. This nonverbal impact is particularly potent when individuals are not actively scrutinizing the content or are distracted, a common scenario in the passive consumption of social media content.

In recent years, a notable trend in social media marketing has been the rise of social media *influencers*. As Rettberg (2018, p. 434) explains:

Influencers are everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces, and monetize their following by integrating ‘advertorials’ into their blog or social media posts.

Unlike traditional advertising, where brands directly promote their products, influencer marketing relies on trusted personalities to endorse or recommend products and services to their audience. The influencers use advertising and sponsorships, leveraging their online personas to personalize their message and foster intimacy. This involves tapping into emotions and crafting empathetic communication strategies (Lövheim, 2013, as cited in Rettberg, 2018).

3.3.2.3. Audience interaction and engagement

Social media has revolutionized the way individuals and organizations communicate, interact, and engage with their audiences. As we had seen so far, nonverbal communication theories provide a foundation for understanding how visual and symbolic elements influence audience perception and engagement. Researchers suggest that around 66% of meaning in human interactions derives from nonverbal cues (Birdwhistell, 1955;

Philpott, 1983). Although social media lacks the direct physical presence, visual elements such as emojis, images, and videos act as substitutes for traditional NVC, significantly impacting audience engagement.

Engagement on social media is defined by the extent of interaction between the content creator and the audience. However, merely quantifying the number of interactions does not provide comprehensive and deep insights. It is equally crucial to understand the level of engagement individuals experience during and after their engagement, their interactions, and how these experiences shape their perceptions and feelings toward the brand. Therefore, additional metrics including indicators of brand likeability, brand image, brand awareness, brand loyalty, brand affiliation, congruency, and purchase intent may be more diagnostic, especially because without context the metrics are merely a number (Tuten & Solomon, 2018).

Figure 15

The Engagement Food Chain



Source: Tuten and Solomon (2018)

Tuten and Solomon (2018) proposes the application of an engagement version of the traditional marketing funnel, as illustrated in Figure 15. The Engagement Food Chain

illustrates each specific engagement action we aim for as the target audience progresses through the customer journey. It is important to note that actions without real significance are not relevant in this context, for instance, likes or superficial interactions alone do not provide a comprehensive view of engagement since they do not necessarily reflect the emotional impact or deep connection with the brand.

Forrester Research (as cited in Tuten and Solomon, 2018) suggests the measuring engagement in a way that not only considers behavior but also encompasses emotion and potential impact, through four main dimensions: 1) involvement, 2) interaction, 3) intimacy, and 4) influence. Utilizing these multiple dimensions helps capture a more comprehensive understanding of engagement. Each specific dimensions and corresponding metrics are detailed in Table 10.

Table 10

Dimensions of Engagement

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Explanation</i>	<i>Metrics</i>
Involvement	The presence of a person at each social touch point	Page or profile visits; content views
Interaction	The actions people take while at the social touch point	Likes; shares; completion rates; comments; downloads
Intimacy	The affection or aversion a person holds for the brand	Sentiment; complaints posted in social channels; compliments posted; contribution quality; emotion expressed in UGS
Influence	The likelihood that a person will advocate for the brand	Quantity, frequency, and score of reviews and ratings; number of recommendations; referrals

Source: Tuten and Solomon (2018)

NVC enhances engagement by providing additional layers of meaning and emotional context to textual communication. For example, a study highlighted that posts with visual elements, such as images and videos, receive higher engagement compared to text-only posts because they elicit stronger emotional responses and create a more immersive experience for the audience (Cinelli, Peruzzi, Schmidt, Vila, Costa & Quattrociocchi, 2022).

This effect was notably observed in 2012, when Facebook introduced Timeline for brands, enabling brand pages to promote visual content in a completely new way, with demonstrable positive results. As presented by Walter and Gioglio (2014), just one month after its introduction allowing visual content, such as photos and videos, in Facebook Timeline for brands, the platform experienced a 65% increase in engagement. Additionally, research by BuzzSumo indicates that visuals boost engagement on social media significantly – 2.3 times more on Facebook posts and 1.5 times more on tweets. Blog posts with a visual every 75 to 100 words also earn more shares, underscoring the critical role of visual storytelling in digital communication (Content Marketing Institute, 2021).

3.4. Cross-cultural considerations in nonverbal strategies

Despite nonverbal communication strategies on social media not being tailored to any specific culture, it is important to recognize that socio-cultural characteristics can significantly influence how this communication is decoded by different cultures. This consideration is essential for ensuring that messages are interpreted as intended across diverse cultural contexts, especially considering that nonverbal communication elements such as gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, posture, and proxemics, can vary greatly from one culture to another.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, sociocultural dimensions, such as individualism-collectivism, power distance, and high-low context, impact nonverbal communication styles and interpretations, not exclusively in how communication is perceived but also by shaping user engagement online. For instance, individualistic cultures prioritize personal autonomy and direct communication, while collectivistic cultures emphasize group harmony and indirect communication (Burgoon *et al.*, 2010; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). The same can be said about how cultural dimensions can influence on specific aspects of nonverbal behavior. For example, individualistic cultures may exhibit more assertive body language and maintain greater personal space, while collectivistic cultures prioritize nonverbal cues that promote group cohesion and relational harmony (Knapp *et al.*, 2012). This shows the importance of considering sociocultural factors when designing and implementing nonverbal communication strategies on social media platforms.

Understanding the interconnection between culture and nonverbal communication is essential for effective communication in diverse settings. By recognizing cultural differences in nonverbal behavior, individuals can navigate cross-cultural interactions with greater sensitivity and adaptability (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019). In this sense, cross-cultural competence is fundamental, as it allows brands to better understand and respecting cultural differences, ensuring that their messages and visual cues resonate with diverse audiences and avoiding misinterpretations, which can lead to negative perceptions.

The Havaianas brand provides an interesting example of cross-cultural adaptation of nonverbal strategies on social media. Havaianas, originally a Brazilian brand, has successfully positioned itself in various international markets by leveraging nonverbal cues that resonate with diverse cultural norms. Their advertising strategies often highlight vibrant colors, joyful expressions, and relaxed postures, all of which are nonverbal cues that align with the brand's identity and the cultural expectations of their target audiences.

For instance, in Brazilian culture, the use of bright colors and cheerful imagery is a common nonverbal communication strategy that conveys happiness and relaxation, as shown in Figure 16. When expanding to other markets, Havaianas has maintained these elements while also adapting their nonverbal strategies to align with local cultural norms. This approach not only preserves the brand's core identity and consistency but also ensures that the messages are culturally relevant and engaging for diverse audiences (DeVito, 2016).

Figure 16

Havaianas Brazil's Instagram profile/feed

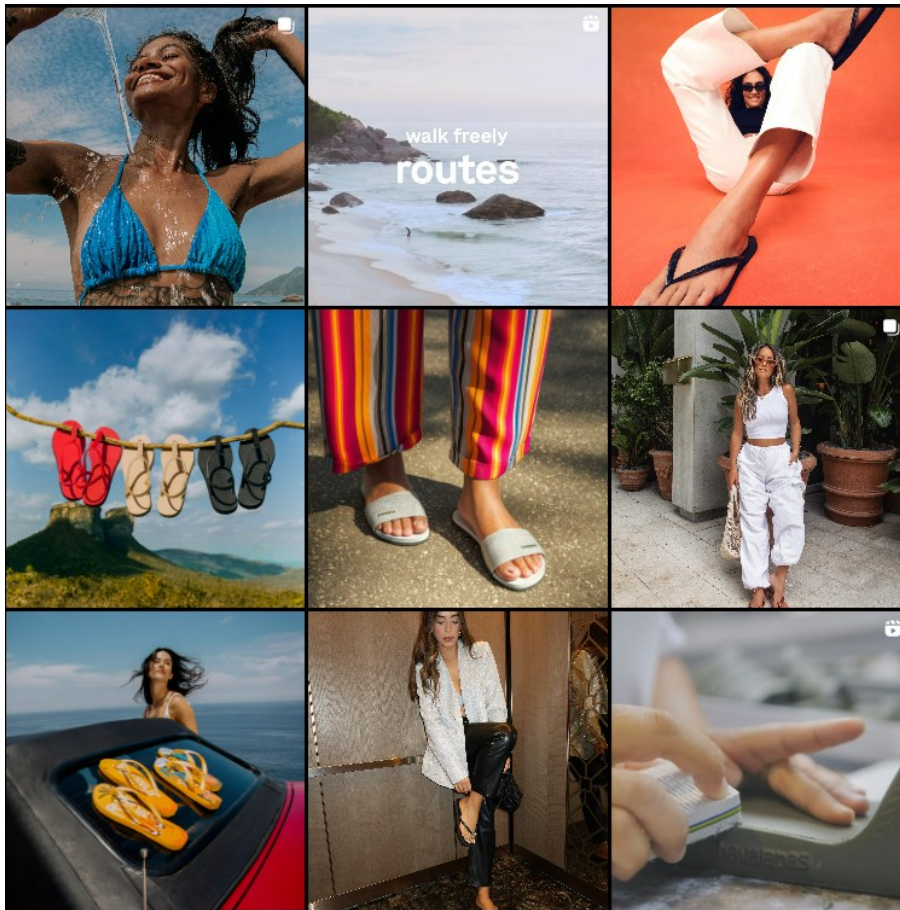


Source: Havaianas (n.d.)

For example, when expanding to the United States, Havaianas maintained these elements but adapted their nonverbal strategies to align with American cultural norms. In the U.S., where individualism and assertiveness are more pronounced, Havaianas' advertisements often feature images of personal enjoyment and leisure, resonating with the American emphasis on personal happiness and freedom, as illustrated in Figure 17.

Figure 17

Havaianas US' Instagram profile/feed

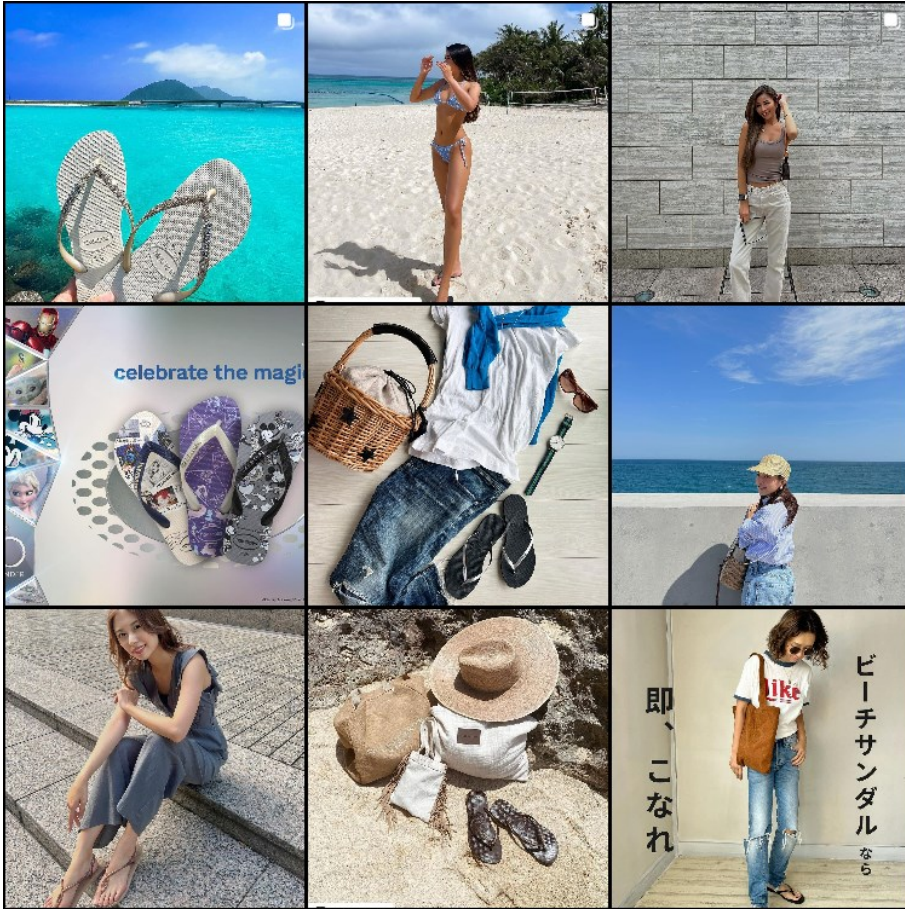


Source: Havaianas US (n.d.)

In Japan, where the culture emphasizes harmony, modesty, and subtlety, Havaianas' marketing strategies incorporate nonverbal cues that reflect these values. Advertisements in Japan often use softer colors, minimalist designs, and imagery that emphasizes group enjoyment and tranquility. This approach aligns with the Japanese cultural preference for understated elegance and communal harmony (Hall, 1966).

Figure 18

Havaianas Japan's Instagram profile/feed



Source: Havaianas Japan (n.d.)

Maintaining brand consistency across different markets is essential for global brands, like Havaianas. In this scenario, visual identity has an important role in ensuring that the brand remains recognizable and trustworthy across different cultural contexts. The consistent use of logos, color schemes, and design styles helps to create a cohesive and memorable brand image that fosters loyalty and trust among worldwide consumers (Wheeler, 2009).

It is important to mention that, while the examples provided focus on visual elements, other nonverbal cues, such as tone of voice, gestures, and body language, are also critical in brand communication. For instance, the tone of voice used in advertisements and social media can convey the brand's personality and values, influencing how the brand is perceived across different cultures. Other paralinguistic

features, such as pitch, volume, and articulation, also play a role in shaping the brand's identity and emotional connection with the audience (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012).

These visual and nonverbal strategies, when used effectively, can help brands create a strong and consistent presence in the global market. As noted, branding depends on creating an emotional bond with consumers and nonverbal communication is a powerful tool to evoke and activate emotional responses, facilitating a deeper and more meaningful connection with audiences (Van Praet, 2012). Therefore, brands must carefully consider and adapt their nonverbal cues to align with cultural norms and preferences to achieve successful cross-cultural communication and brand consistency.

Conclusions

The present project was aimed at discussing how nonverbal communication strategies are used in social media, in order to engage diverse cultural audiences and enhance brand perception. As it has been exposed, this exploration highlights the importance of understanding and leveraging NVC to enhance audience engagement, influence brand perception, and foster consumer loyalty. Thus, the findings underscore the important position that nonverbal cues occupy in digital communication, making it a key component of modern branding and marketing strategies.

Nonverbal communication, traditionally studied in face-to-face interactions, is evolving to fit the digital universe. In online platforms, where physical presence is absent, digital representations of NVC such as emojis, emoticons, and visual content serve as substitutes for facial expressions, gestures, and body language. These digital nonverbal cues are essential for conveying emotions, building rapport, and enhancing the overall communication experience on social media. Also, these adaptations are essential as they provide a means for expressing subtleties that would otherwise be lost in text-based communication.

In digital communication, nonverbal cues manifest themselves through various formats, including images, video clips, and interactive elements such as *likes* and *reactions*. These cues are fundamental to shaping how messages are received and interpreted, enhancing the emotional richness of online interactions (Meikle, 2016).

Interestingly, much like face-to-face interactions, digital nonverbal cues often operate at an unconscious level, subtly influencing perceptions and responses. These cues can include timing of responses, choice of visuals, and even the style of communication. Unconscious processing of these cues helps in forming quick judgments about the sender's intent and the emotional tone of the message. In this sense, it is important to mention the processes of *encoding* and *decoding* NVC in the digital realm that, similar to 'real world', involve the creation and interpretation of nonverbal messages (Hall, 2019). Encoding is the sender's ability to effectively convey emotions and intentions through visual and auditory elements, while decoding is the receiver's ability to accurately interpret these messages. Both processes are essential for effective communication and rely heavily on shared cultural understandings.

Sociocultural dimensions significantly impact how NVC is both encoded and decoded. Cultural factors such as individualism and collectivism, high-context and low-context communication, and power distance shape the way nonverbal messages are crafted and understood. Awareness of these dimensions enables communicators to tailor their messages to align with cultural expectations and norms, especially because the patterns of nonverbal communication may vary widely across cultures (Burgoon *et al.* 2010). Gestures, facial expressions, and other nonverbal signals can have different meanings in different cultural contexts. Understanding these variations is essential for avoiding miscommunication and ensuring that messages are received as intended (Knapp *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, brands must be adept at recognizing and adapting to these patterns to communicate effectively with global audiences.

It can be presumed that cross-cultural competence is fundamental in nowadays globalized world. Proficiency in intercultural NVC allows brands to handle cultural differences and build meaningful connections with diverse audiences. This competence involves understanding cultural norms, display rules, and communication styles, which helps in crafting messages that resonate across cultural and demographic boundaries. For some time now, brands and influencers increasingly leverage NVC to influence and engage audiences worldwide. By incorporating culturally relevant nonverbal cues, they can enhance their appeal and foster deeper connections. Effective use of NVC in digital marketing campaigns can also significantly impact brand loyalty and consumer engagement, demonstrating the power of nonverbal elements in shaping perceptions (Humphreys, 2016).

In a globalized world, sensitivity to cultural nuances in NVC is decisive to avoid potential crises caused by misunderstandings. Missteps in nonverbal communication can lead to perceptions of prejudice or insensitivity (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019), damaging a brand's reputation. Therefore, brands must prioritize cultural empathy and adaptability in their communication strategies to mitigate risks and foster positive brand image.

Other additional key strategies of nonverbal communication on social media involve the use of imagery, videos, emojis, and other visual tools to convey messages. These strategies help brands communicate more effectively by adding emotional depth

and context to their interactions. Visual content can capture attention and convey complex ideas quickly, making it a powerful tool in digital communication.

An alternative layer to emotional expression through NVC has to do with its strong potential to connect people and brands. Digital platforms allow for the expression of emotions through various nonverbal means, such as emoticons and emojis. These elements help convey feelings and foster emotional bonds, enhancing the overall engagement and connection. Emoticons and emojis, for example, are powerful tools in digital communication, enabling users to express emotions succinctly. Their use in brand communication can humanize interactions, making them more relatable and engaging. These symbols bridge the gap between text and emotion, adding a layer of meaning that enhances understanding and connection (Derks *et al.*, 2008).

Another significant aspect previously touched on by Aaker (2014) is that branding in the digital age involves creating a consistent visual identity that resonates with the target audience. Repetition of visual elements like logos, colors, and fonts across different platforms helps in establishing a strong brand presence. Also, consistency in visual identity reinforces brand recognition and loyalty, vital for maintaining a competitive edge in the market.

Additionally, brand communication on social media thrives on the principle of two-way channels, where interaction and feedback are integral (Wheeler, 2009). This dynamic engagement allows brands to listen to their audiences and respond accordingly, fostering a sense of community and belonging. User-generated content can also have a significant role in this, as it adds authenticity and relatability to brand communications, providing genuine insights into audience preferences and behaviors. Encouraging user-generated content can amplify brand messages and enhance engagement. This kind of content often carries a higher degree of trust and authenticity, making it a powerful tool in digital marketing strategies (Walter & Gioglio, 2014).

Moreover, for marketing and advertising purposes, NVC allows to create compelling campaigns, through visual storytelling, emotional appeals, and culturally relevant imagery that help in capturing attention and driving engagement, ultimately leading to better marketing outcomes. Other important key for achieving effective communication across different targets is based on cross-cultural considerations, as adapting messages to align with cultural norms and values helps in avoiding

misinterpretations and enhancing relevance. This approach not only mitigates risks but also opens opportunities for deeper connections with diverse audiences.

Regarding the scenario of NVC in digital communication, there are both adversities and opportunities. While cultural misunderstandings show challenges, they also offer a chance to demonstrate cultural sensitivity and adaptability. By observing these complexities effectively, brands can build stronger, more inclusive relationships with their audiences.

Finally, this study highlights several possibilities for further research that are worth noting. Future studies could focus on different cultural groups to broaden the understanding of NVC across different demographics. Additionally, expanding the data sources to include more social media platforms and other forms of digital media could provide deeper insights into trends and strategies.

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