

When style obscures substance: Visual attention to display appropriateness in the 2012 presidential debates

Zijian Harrison Gong & Erik P. Bucy

To cite this article: Zijian Harrison Gong & Erik P. Bucy (2016) When style obscures substance: Visual attention to display appropriateness in the 2012 presidential debates, *Communication Monographs*, 83:3, 349-372, DOI: [10.1080/03637751.2015.1119868](https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2015.1119868)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2015.1119868>



Published online: 14 Jan 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1392



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 16 View citing articles [↗](#)



When style obscures substance: Visual attention to display appropriateness in the 2012 presidential debates

Zijian Harrison Gong^a  and Erik P. Bucy^b 

^aDepartment of Communication, University of Tampa, Tampa, FL, USA; ^bCenter for Communication Research, College of Media and Communication, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX, USA

ABSTRACT

As with the first televised debates in 1960, the 2012 US presidential debates accentuated the importance of nonverbal behavior in political competition, with President Obama receiving widespread criticism for his disengaged and arguably inappropriate communication style in the first debate. To investigate the perceptual impact of such nonverbal expectancy violations, this study first employs an experimental design to examine the consequence of inappropriate leader displays, operationalized as nonverbal behaviors that are incongruent with the rhetorical setting. Theoretical explanations about the evaluative consequences of inappropriate leader displays are described in light of expectancy violations theory. Results of a repeated measures eye-tracking experiment find support for the prediction that inappropriate facial expressions increase visual attention on the source of violation, prompt critical scrutiny, and elicit negative evaluations. These findings are further explored with qualitative analysis of focus group responses to key moments from the first and third presidential debates. The discussion considers the broader implications of nonverbal communication in politics and how expressive leader displays serve as meaningful cues for citizens when making sense of televised political encounters.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 3 January 2015
Accepted 14 September 2015

KEYWORDS

2012 presidential debates; political competition; nonverbal expectancy violations; display appropriateness; nonverbal behavior; eye-tracking

Compelling evidence has demonstrated that the nonverbal behavior of political candidates significantly affects viewer evaluations, including trait assessments, emotional responses, memory for issue information, and expressions of support (e.g., Bucy, 2011; Olivola & Todorov, 2010; Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren, & Hall, 2005). Indeed, President Obama's performance during the first presidential debate of 2012 led the *New York Times* to characterize the president's first televised encounter with Mitt Romney as "arguably the most dismal night of Mr. Obama's political career," owing to the president's detached and dominated style (Nagourney, Parker, Rutenberg, & Zeleny, 2012). Such episodes reinforce the notion that nonverbal cues provide a channel through which voters not only form impressions but also shift political support (Noller, Gallois, Hayes, & Bohle, 1988).¹

Beyond assessments of relatively stable traits such as competence or attractiveness, the dynamic quality of televised leader appearances facilitates the coding and appraisal of *situational* trait evaluations, including the appropriateness of leader displays (Bucy,

2011; Seiter & Weger, 2005). In politics, evaluations of appropriate behavior often turn on questions of social dominance, which concerns the ability to assert authority while avoiding signs of submission, evasion, or appeasement in the face of challenge (see Bucy & Newhagen, 1999). In the television era, effectively performing leadership requires a delicate balancing act, however, between politeness, interruption, and argumentation, especially when a rival attempts to assume the mantle of leadership through verbal assertion and aggressive debate tactics. Although leadership has been associated more with positive communication and reassurance, and challenges to leadership more with angry and threatening displays (Lanzetta, Sullivan, Masters, & McHugo, 1985), in the face of a concerted challenge by a forceful opponent, leaders are tasked with communicating reassurance by displaying an appropriate amount of combativeness themselves.

For nonverbal reactions to be evaluated as appropriate, they must be compatible with the message and with the tone of the setting in which they occur (Bucy, 2011). In other words, the appropriateness of nonverbal expressions indexes the congruency between the candidate's nonverbal expressions and immediate rhetorical context, wherein situationally consistent responses are classified as appropriate and situationally inconsistent responses as inappropriate. In competitive settings, appropriate nonverbal behavior thus entails an assertive response to challenge or verbal attack.

The 2012 US presidential debates accentuated the importance of appropriate nonverbal behavior in politics, as observers widely criticized President Obama for turning in a disengaged and lackluster performance in the first debate. Compared to Mitt Romney's high energy level, Obama spent too much time "looking down and avoiding eye contact, even with the camera. At times he [even] winced as if his opponent was causing him indigestion, but he didn't return fire" (Stanley, 2012, p. A22). Although not verbally inappropriate, Obama's avoidance behavior was viewed as expressively incongruous with the rhetorical situation. Such incongruity led to the perception that Obama was either oblivious or unconcerned about Romney's attacks. In earlier televised debates, such dissonant nonverbal behaviors may have gone less noticed due to the use of a single camera shot that focused on one speaker at a time (albeit with some cutaways or reaction shots), yet the ubiquitous use by all the networks in 2012 of split-screen technology that features both candidates simultaneously made their expressive nonverbal reactions more prominent than usual.

Although the influence of nonverbal expressions on trait inferences has been documented, previous studies have not fully addressed the cognitive and evaluative consequences of inappropriate displays in political communication. Scholars typically study the effects of nonverbal displays by isolating the visual and verbal channels of communication (see Hall, Goren, Chaiken, & Todorov, 2009; Mattes et al., 2010), rather than by considering the overall impression of an integrated audiovisual presentation. The evidence for verbal influence largely derives from contexts in which strong arguments are emphasized, such as speeches and debates. Yet with certain notable exceptions, research on debates has largely overlooked the cognitive and evaluative consequences of candidate nonverbal behavior.

Departing from this lack of integration in research, our study employs a mixed-method design, including both an experimental investigation (a carefully controlled eye-tracking study) and a series of focus group discussions, to examine more holistically the consequences of politically inappropriate displays. Whereas our eye-tracking experiment provides a precise quantitative measure of visual attention to display appropriateness, the

focus group discussions pull back to explain the perceived social meaning of these findings, independent of the controlled experimental setting. Thus, viewer observations about key encounters during the 2012 debates are used to elaborate and explain some of the underlying dynamics that drive attention and result in cognitive resource allocation to particular nonverbal behaviors.

Inappropriate displays are operationalized as nonverbal behaviors that are incongruent with the communication setting in which they occur. For Obama, particular attention is paid to evasive, lackluster, and socially submissive nonverbal behavior in juxtaposition to verbal attacks in the first debate, contrasted with his more engaged style in the third debate. For Romney, attention is paid to the efficacy of his attacks, which seemed to lose their purchase in the third debate when Obama became more assertive, as well as to the authenticity of his communication style, which was critiqued for its hurried pace and rehearsed quality—including the rigidity of his smile (see also Stewart, Bucy, & Mehu, 2015).

Next, we discuss the importance of nonverbal presentation style in political competition and the concept of emotional appropriateness. Theoretical explanations about the evaluative consequences of inappropriate leader displays are described in light of expectancy violations theory. Extending this line of inquiry, a repeated measures eye-tracking experiment is conducted to examine whether inappropriate facial expressions do indeed increase attention on the source of violation and result in critical scrutiny and negative evaluation. The experimental portion of the study also investigates the relationship between viewer attention to inappropriate displays, judgments of display appropriateness, and memory for verbal information during key exchanges.

In the second, qualitative part of the study, we asked separate groups of viewers to identify and elaborate what they noticed in key exchanges between Obama and Romney and how they assess the appropriateness of leader displays. For this part of the study, we conducted a series of focus groups in which two contrasting clips from the 2012 presidential debates were shown, one from the first debate and one from the third debate. These debate excerpts, running approximately 1 min in length each (67 s and 53 s), showed Obama either acting appropriately or inappropriately and were contextualized during the focus groups with the presentation and discussion of several other “memorable moments” from televised politics. In the inappropriate clip from the first debate, Obama was shown in split-screen format glancing downward with a slight smirk while being verbally attacked by Romney. In the appropriate clip from the third debate, Obama is shown as much more engaged, continually staring at Romney, interjecting out of turn with short objections, and denying several of Romney’s claims. Rather than avoiding or enduring Romney’s verbal barrages, Obama makes it difficult for Romney to complete his point.

Facial expressions and emotional appropriateness

As research in social neuroscience has shown, faces serve as a major information source about others. From facial appearances, people not only form general impressions but also make specific inferences about personality traits (Hassin & Trope, 2000). Empirical studies have shown that facial morphology can have significant influence on social outcomes. For instance, individuals with a baby-faced appearance are less likely to receive

severe judicial outcomes than people with a more mature appearance (Zebrowitz & McDonald, 1991). Observers also draw trait inferences from the facial appearance of political leaders. Todorov et al. (2005) found that competence inferences based solely on facial appearances forecasted election outcomes better than chance. Appearance-based judgments are spontaneous and occur without deliberating, as studies have documented that people are able to make reliable trait judgments about political figures' competence and trustworthiness even after thin-slice or short duration (100 ms) exposures to their images (Ballew & Todorov, 2007; Willis & Todorov, 2006).

Compared to appeals that are verbally narrated or written in news reports, political leaders' televised facial expressions elicit a higher level of affective response and attitudinal change (Patterson, Churchill, Burger, & Powell, 1992). This observation reinforces the claim by medium theorists that the increasing reliance on television as the primary mode of political communication tends to shift the criteria by which political leaders are judged (Meyrowitz, 1985). Considering the camera's tendency to spotlight and exaggerate small flaws, especially during close-up portrayals, there is a basic requirement for politicians to create a successful image on television. Minimalization is key: whatever you do, do less of it to avoid an inappropriate moment broadcasted for all to see (Miller, 2001). Indeed, an overwrought delivery can not only distract from policy substance but also undermine communicator credibility. As the playwright Arthur Miller once observed in an address about political performance to the National Endowment for the Humanities, "dire overemphasis casts doubt on the text" (2001, p. 34). This observation speaks to the capacity of television (and videos that "go viral" online) to amplify the negative repercussions of inappropriate nonverbal political behaviors with close-up portrayals and repeated exposures. Thus, assessments of political leaders can hinge on nonverbal presentations, especially facial displays, as much as the verbal message (Bucy, 2011; Lanzetta et al., 1985).

Because inferences derived from facial appearances and expressive displays influence processing of subsequent information (Bucy & Newhagen, 1999; Todorov et al., 2005), the appropriateness of nonverbal behavior is an important consideration. Emotional appropriateness can be viewed as a situational trait manifested in nonverbal communication that is directed toward external circumstances (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1983). The ability of political leaders to develop an effective communication style for television may depend on their projecting appropriate nonverbal emotion (Bucy & Newhagen, 1999). Compelling evidence has shown that elements of televised leader displays, including gaze shift and blinking rate, can have a negative effect on evaluations of candidate competence (Exline, 1985). An analysis of the 2004 presidential debates between George W. Bush and John Kerry found that a high blink rate and anomalous blink pattern by Bush played a decisive role in perceptions of the president as tense and nervous (Stewart & Mosely, 2009).

Expressive displays are thus politically significant because they forecast assessments of political leaders, whether favorable or unfavorable. Indeed, the *performance* of leadership often takes precedence over more abstract policy considerations, of which all but the most informed voters have a cursory understanding (see Masters, 1989). Thus, the appropriateness of televised leader behavior can have a substantial effect on public perceptions because it reflects an individual's ability to communicate nonverbally his or her competence to lead. Because inappropriate displays can be thought of as nonverbal expectancy

violations that “invite closer scrutiny of the source and prompt deliberative cognitive processing” (Bucy & Bradley, 2004, p. 70), they should elicit more attention than appropriate displays. Both expectancy violations theory (Burgoon & Hale, 1988) and classical theories of the orienting response in cognitive psychology (Sokolov, 1963) provide theoretical explanations for this position.

Expectancy violations theory holds that people enter a communication exchange anticipating what behaviors are “possible, feasible, appropriate, and typical for a particular setting, purpose, and set of participants” (Burgoon & Hale, 1988, p. 60). When a nonverbal display falls outside an expected behavioral parameter, arousal will be evoked, causing recipients or viewers of violations to allocate greater attention to the source (Burgoon & Hale, 1988). The notion that additional attention will be allocated to unexpected nonverbal displays is consistent with the orienting response in cognitive psychology. According to Sokolov’s (1963) conception of the orienting reflex, after repeated presentations of a stimulus, neuronal pathways form representing consistent patterns of stimulus exposure. Any stimulus that is novel or incongruent with existing neuronal models would thus elicit an orienting, or “what is it?” response as the nervous system detects novelty and responds to a change in the environment (Sokolov, 1963).

Evidence from previous research on political nonverbal behavior has shown that as attention to media messages increases, inappropriate displays elicit more cardiac deceleration than appropriate displays, suggesting greater attention and cognitive processing of unexpected behavior (Bucy & Bradley, 2004; see also Barry, 1982). However, considering that heart rate is not a very sensitive measure of attention and does not differentiate between *intra*-stimulus elements, other, more precise, measures are needed to determine which elements in a viewer’s visual field are attended to and receive extensive processing. To address this question, we utilize eye-tracking in this study as an indicator of visual attention.

Although eye-tracking also has recognized limitations, this study uses the technique as a more precise measure of viewer attention to leader displays than self-report or psychophysiology. The major assumption in eye-tracking research is that *gaze fixations* indicate what is being cognitively processed, whereas *gaze durations* indicate the amount of processing. “Additional time spent on perception is not used to examine the secondary elements, but to reexamine the most important elements” of a visual presentation (Yarbus, 1967, p. 193). Additionally, considering that expectancy violations invite closer scrutiny of the source and cause viewers to initiate a series of cognitive appraisals about the violation (Burgoon & Hale, 1988), viewers should attend to inappropriate displays more frequently than appropriate displays. Thus, in the context of the 2012 presidential debates, it can be predicted that inappropriate emotional displays will elicit more visual attention than appropriate displays. This will be manifested in terms of gaze duration and fixation, such that:

H_{1A}: Viewers fixate on inappropriate displays more often than on appropriate displays.

H_{1B}: Viewers focus longer on inappropriate displays than appropriate displays.

Research on audiovisual redundancy in television has found that memory for verbal information suffers when there is a mismatch between the audio narrative and visual image (Lang, 1995). Grimes (1991) argued that when dissonance between the verbal and visual streams increases, viewers may concentrate on the visual aspect of the presentation and ignore the verbal message to reduce cognitive overload. In a televised debate, this

effect may be pronounced when one candidate is delivering a statement while the other, whether intentionally or not, is expressing an inappropriate facial display (i.e., committing a nonverbal expectancy violation). In such cases, because the verbal narration and inappropriate visual display are competing for viewer attention, memory for verbal information should suffer as a result. Consequently, we predict that:

H₂: In televised debate encounters, when two candidates are shown simultaneously in a split-screen format, recall of verbal information is better for appropriate displays than inappropriate displays.

Partisanship and inappropriate displays

Although emphasized in our study design, candidate evaluations are not based solely on inferences from political nonverbal behavior. Considering the complex nature of political impression formation and decision-making, people may rely heavily on their partisanship as a perceptual cue when evaluating televised debate performances because party affiliation provides an efficient global mechanism for simplifying the evaluation process. Thus, we would expect partisanship to moderate the evaluative consequences of inappropriate candidate displays.

Previous research has outlined different mechanisms through which partisanship can influence evaluations of political performance. First, partisanship can affect political judgments through heuristic processing. Heuristic processing refers to the reliance in judgmental shortcuts, or cognitive mechanisms, for organizing and simplifying political preferences (Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991). Acquiring and using collected information to make voting decisions are costly activities that require individuals to invest time and effort. Meanwhile, the amount of information we can consider at any one time is limited (Fiske & Taylor, 1984; Lang, 1995). When coping with the complexity and ambiguity of candidate behavior, viewers are likely to make evaluations based on inferential processes driven by the use of heuristic cues, which facilitate reliable judgments while conserving cognitive resources (Mondak, 1993).

From a social psychological perspective, when people are seeking explanations for behaviors, they are motivated to interpret a behavior by the need to protect self-identification and enhance self-esteem (Brewer & Brown, 1988). For example, research in occupational psychology has found that people attribute success to internal, or personal, factors when landing a new job, yet assign external blame when failing to acquire a position (Furnham, 1982). This self-serving attribution bias may also operate on a social level, wherein people tend to attribute positive actions to, and discount negative activities committed by, in-group members and exaggerate the severity of transgressions by out-group members. Thus, negative evaluations of a candidate's inappropriate displays may be mitigated when viewers share the candidate's party affiliation and exacerbated when viewers identify with the opposition.

This in-group bias has been found to operate in voting and disaster response scenarios in political science. For example, partisanship has been shown to moderate people's economic evaluations when making voting decisions (Rudolph, 2003) and influence attributions of responsibility over the failure to provide an immediate response to natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina (Malhotra & Kuo, 2008). Moreover, partisans may

refute or disregard new information that is not in accordance with their political outlook (Gerber & Huber, 2009). This result is reinforced by experimental findings showing that partisan loyalties have a pervasive effect on responsibility attributions such that partisans perceived changes as more positive when the government is thought responsible compared to when the government is not thought responsible (Tilley & Hobolt, 2011). Partisanship can thus have significant perceptual influence serving as a facilitator of in-group bias. As such, it can be predicted that:

H₃: Partisanship (in-group identification) moderates viewer evaluations of candidate displays such that partisans evaluate their own candidate's displays less harshly than displays by the opponent, regardless of their appropriateness.

Method

To investigate these hypotheses, this study uses two methods. First, a 2 × 3 mixed within- and between-subjects experiment was conducted to assess the effects of nonverbal display appropriateness among partisans on memory and evaluations. The first factor, display appropriateness, had two levels: appropriate and inappropriate. The second factor, partisan identification, had three levels: Democrat, Republican, and Independent. Partisan identification served as the between-subjects variable, and emotional appropriateness as the within-subjects variable. Following the experimental data collection, a series of focus groups was conducted using the strongest performing “appropriate” and “inappropriate” clips from the experiment. In the groups, participants were asked a standard set of questions after viewing each clip to identify what stood out and resonated with them, and how these observed communication dynamics affected their global assessments of both Romney and Obama.

Stimulus construction

For our stimulus material, we sampled from the first and third 2012 televised presidential debates, in which president Obama was viewed as passive on the one hand and assertive on the other. Footage of the debates was drawn from C-SPAN, which used a consistent camera angle and split-screen format throughout the debate. (The second debate followed a town hall format and was not visually compatible with the first and third debates.) We then identified segments in which the candidates' nonverbal behavior was salient and coded for the presence of appropriate or inappropriate display behavior. In line with previous research (see Bucy, 2011), emotional appropriateness was defined as whether the candidate was acting in a fashion consistent with the rhetorical context, wherein situationally consistent responses are classified as appropriate and situationally inconsistent responses as inappropriate (Figure 1).

Two strategies were employed to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate expressions. First, a detailed visual content analysis was conducted of the first and third debates, using each candidate's nonverbal behavior coded in 30 s increments to identify appropriate and inappropriate expressions based on the rhetorical context of displays as well as their emotional valence and arousal (Bucy & Gong, 2015). When an emotional display matched the rhetorical context in terms of valence and/or intensity (e.g., a negative

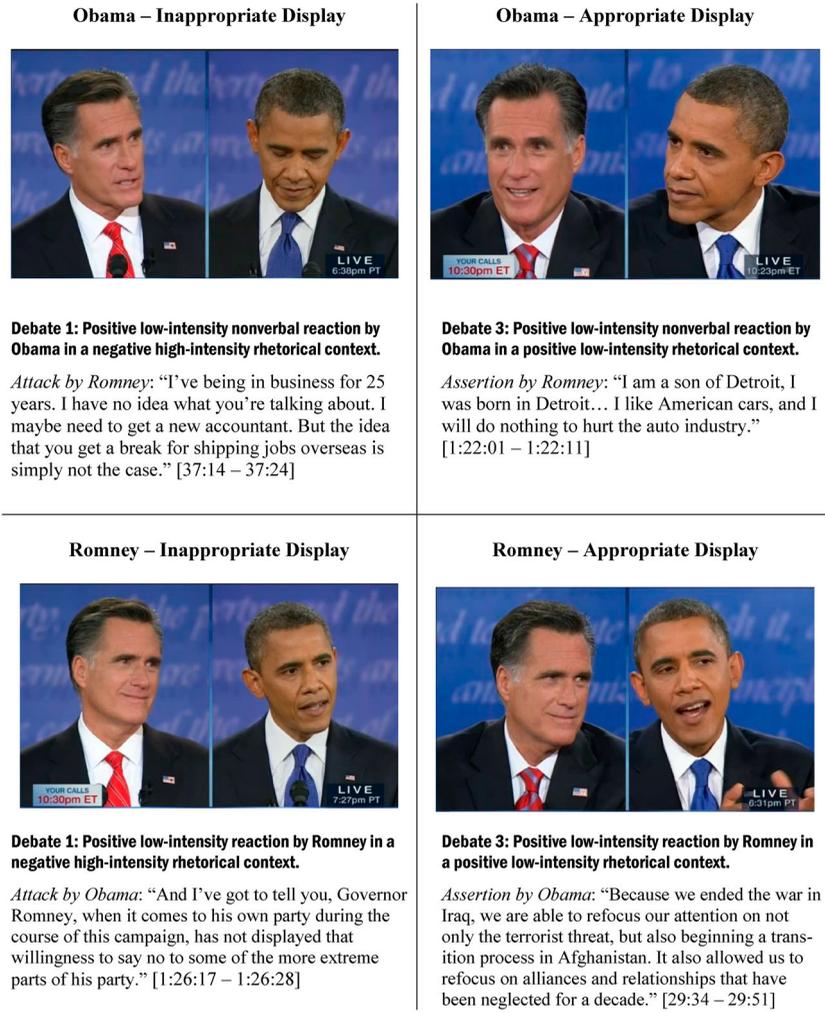


Figure 1. Nonverbal display appropriateness.

high-intensity display in response to a negative, high-intensity rhetorical attack), the display was coded as appropriate. In contrast, when an emotional display was incongruent with the rhetorical context (e.g., a negative, low-intensity display in response to positive, high-intensity information), the expression was coded as inappropriate. In other words, given a competitive context, observers should consider candidates’ collected, forthright, and determined expressions as appropriate.

In contrast, if the context is characterized by a positive and light mood (e.g., in response to a joke or witty comment), yet the candidate’s facial expressions were anxious or evasive, these expressions would be coded as inappropriate because such nonverbal behavior is not congruent with the immediate communication setting. For example, when Mitt Romney’s proposals for his first days in office were being attacked by President Obama toward the end of the first debate, at 1:24:31,² the former Massachusetts governor displayed a controlled-false (or “plastic”) smile characterized by retracted mouth corners and a rigid

facial expression (see Stewart et al., 2015) while looking to moderator Jim Lehrer, rather than showing negativity or disapproval. Such incongruity, seeming agreeable while being attacked, could be viewed as a violation of expected political behavior (Bucy, 2011; Goman, 2012). Likewise, President Obama's persistent downward gaze and deliberate avoidance of eye contact with Romney in the first debate could be viewed as "non-presidential"—in other words, inappropriate.

Stimulus pretest

Based on the results of the content analysis, 10 short clips (five appropriate and five inappropriate displays) were selected from C-SPAN's telecast of the debates for stimulus pretesting. All 10 clips featured the 2-shot split-screen technique wherein both candidates appear on the screen simultaneously and each candidate occupies half of the screen. This presentation allowed viewers to assess the appropriateness of a given display in real time and monitor the performance of one candidate without overlooking the behavior of the other. Each clip shown to participants in the pretest was approximately 2 min in length. To provide the rhetorical context and tone in which the candidates' communicative behavior occurred, the clips were shown with the sound on. (Unlike some previous presidential debates, in which audiences were allowed to cheer and jeer candidate statements, there was no background noise in 2012 due to ground rules preventing audience outbursts.) Next, to verify the difference between appropriate and inappropriate displays, the clips were rated by means of continuous response measurement (CRM) and self-report scales.

The stimulus pretest was conducted on a convenience sample of 59 undergraduate students (mean age = 21.1 years, $SD = 2.2$) from an experimental research pool at a major university in the southwestern US. In terms of party affiliation, 31 identified as Republican (51.7%), 10 as Democrat (16.7%), and 19 as Independent or other (31.6%). All received research credit for participating.

During the pretest, participants were asked to evaluate the emotional appropriateness of the candidates' communication behavior in the selected clips using a combination of CRM and self-report. CRM is designed to collect real-time responses during playback of the video clips. Raters were provided a dial to evaluate the appropriateness of the candidates' nonverbal behavior and were asked in separate sessions to evaluate the appropriateness of one candidate's facial expressions during the clip continuously on a 100-point scale, with response options ranging from 0 (*very inappropriate*) to 100 (*very appropriate*). Unlike paper-and-pencil measures, the dials allowed participants to indicate moment-to-moment changes in opinion throughout the clips. The dials were wirelessly connected to a Perception Analyzer[®] system in a theater-like classroom, and CRM data were continuously recorded at a rate of once per second. After viewing each clip, participants also rated the candidates on six scale items (appropriate, honest, trustworthy, in control, credible, and capable) to provide a second indicator of the overall emotional appropriateness of their nonverbal behaviors. The descriptive statistics from these tests appear in Table 1.

Based on these responses, four exemplar clips—two of each candidate featuring one appropriate and one inappropriate display—were selected as stimuli for the main study. The appropriate clips were both from debate 3, whereas the inappropriate clips were

Table 1. Mean ratings for stimulus pretest.

	Obama				Romney			
	CRM		Self-report		CRM		Self-report	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Appropriate displays	56.40	11.83	4.50	1.28	66.09	13.56	5.25	1.20
Inappropriate displays	48.79	12.61	3.14	1.41	52.32	13.11	4.49	1.26

both from debate 1.³ To verify the differences between the appropriate and inappropriate conditions, two paired-sample *t*-tests were conducted on data from the final four clips. Appropriate displays were rated as significantly different from inappropriate displays in terms of both CRM, $t(59) = 6.25$, $p < .001$, and self-report evaluation, $t(59) = 8.40$, $p < .001$.

Main study

A total of 60 different voting-age participants (mean age = 21.7 years, $SD = 2.1$) from a major southwestern university were recruited to take part in the eye-tracking study. Participants were allowed to participate only if they had normal (or corrected to normal) vision. Six participants were dismissed due to the inability to achieve accurate visual calibration. Among the remaining 54 participants, 21 identified as Republican (38.9%), 10 as Democrat (18.5%), and 23 as Independent (42.6%). To avoid familiarity effects, subjects who participated in the pretest were excluded from the main study.

Independent variables

Display appropriateness. This within-subjects variable was defined as the suitability of each candidate's communicative behavior to the rhetorical setting in which it occurred and was operationalized as previously described in the pretest. Each participant viewed and rated two appropriate and two inappropriate displays.

Partisan identification. Partisan identification was measured with three response options, asking participants to indicate whether they identified as Republican, Democrat, or Independent. A separate 7-point scale was used to gauge strength of party support. Participants were also asked which candidate they supported during the 2012 presidential election.

Dependent variables

Effects of display appropriateness were measured on three dependent variables: visual attention, a trait evaluation measure, and recall of verbal information.

Visual attention. Eye-tracking was used as a direct measure of visual attention to leader displays. The eye-tracking technique is ideal for analyzing viewer responses to televised display behavior because it provides a precise measurement of which intra-stimuli elements in a viewer's visual field receive attention.

Within the eye-tracking paradigm, attention is conceptually defined as the visual selection of a certain portion of available sensory information to receive processing priority by the eye (Lamy, Carmel, Egeth, & Leber, 2006). Two measures were employed to

operationalize visual attention: fixation frequency and gaze duration. Fixations are operationalized as moments when the eye remained stationary within a 62-pixel radius around a central point for more than 1/10th of a second. Fixation frequency was measured on the ratio level, as the number of times fixations occurred within an area of interest (AOI). Areas of interest in our debate stimuli were defined as the screen area occupied by the face of the candidate being evaluated. More fixations within an AOI indicate less skimming and more cognitive processing of information (Poole & Ball, 2006). Gaze duration was measured as the total duration of visual fixations within an AOI.

Trait evaluation. The evaluation of televised leader displays was measured using the same 7-point appropriateness scale as the pretest. After viewing each clip, participants evaluated the emotional appropriateness of both candidates shown in the split-screen presentation, and then proceeded to the next clip.

Recall. Both aided and free recall were used to assess memory for verbal information contained within the stimulus clips. A free recall question asked participants to list the major themes and topics that the candidates mentioned in the clips. A composite index for free recall was compiled by coding responses as either 0 for “did not identify the correct theme/topic” or 1 for “identified the theme/topic for this clip” and then summing the total for each participant across conditions. The free recall measure was coded independently by two researchers and agreement was attained on all but four cases. The cases over which there was disagreement were discussed until consensus was achieved.

Aided recall was measured via 16 multiple-choice questions pertaining to the information presented in the clips, 8 questions for appropriate displays and 8 for inappropriate displays. For each clip, participants answered four questions targeting specific factual information from the candidates’ statements (e.g., According to Romney, Obama put a _____-dollar tax break into solar and wind energy industry; Obama indicated that the US has cut _____ to the lowest level in two decades). Recall was tested at the conclusion of the experiment, after participants had engaged in a 5 min distractor task, which included five math questions unrelated to the clips or political issues discussed in the debates. The purpose of the distractor task was to clear short-term memory by preventing rehearsal (mental replay) of the information just presented in the stimulus clips so that recall accuracy was not artificially inflated (see Cowan, 2008). An index of aided recall scores was tabulated by recording correct responses as 1 and incorrect responses as 0, and then summing the total.

Procedure

Participants were recruited to take part in the study without knowing the specific purpose of the research other than “evaluating the 2012 presidential debates.” Data were collected in individual sessions. Upon arrival, each participant was seated in the eye-tracking lab approximately 24 inches from a computer. A researcher first calibrated the participant’s gaze using a nine-point calibration image. The purpose of the calibration process is to account for individual differences in gaze behavior by having participants fixate on each of nine calibration points that are at known locations on the screen. Participants then viewed and evaluated four clips from the 2012 presidential debates averaging just over 2 min each, selected from the pretest. Four randomized presentation orders were used

to control for order effects. Upon completion of the eye-tracking session, participants took part in the distractor task, completed the recall questions, and answered a final set of political and demographic questions.

Apparatus

Stimuli were presented on a 19-inch wide-screen monitor with 1280 × 1024 pixel resolution. An Applied Science Laboratories (ASL) EyeTrac 6 control unit with high-speed optics was used to record participants' gaze during stimulus exposure. The system contains a camera located just below the participant's monitor and is noninvasive. Gaze-tracker software was used to present the stimuli and synchronize it with gaze data. The gaze data were sampled at a frequency of 120 Hz. The room temperature and lighting were adjusted based on each participant's preferences so as to provide a comfortable viewing environment.

Results

To address the eye-tracking hypotheses, a series of paired-sample *t*-tests were performed to examine the differences in both mean fixation frequency and gaze duration as a function of the target AOI, namely, the candidate's facial displays.

Gaze duration and fixation frequency were used to measure visual attention. For gaze duration (i.e., total gaze time within the AOI), analysis showed a significant difference between appropriate and inappropriate displays, $t(52) = 4.51$, $p < 0.001$, $d = .56$. Participants paid 29.1% more attention to inappropriate displays ($M = 22.47$ s, $SD = 9.29$ s) than appropriate displays ($M = 17.39$ s, $SD = 8.75$ s). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported. Fixation frequency for inappropriate displays was also significantly higher than for appropriate displays, $t(52) = 3.54$, $p < .001$, $d = .43$. Viewers attended to inappropriate displays more frequently, an average of almost 41 s per clip ($M = 40.80$ s, $SD = 18.69$ s), than appropriate displays ($M = 33.00$ s, $SD = 17.90$ s). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for all gaze measures, and Figure 2 shows a heat map illustration of fixation frequency.

To address Hypothesis 3, two paired-sample *t*-tests were run using display appropriateness as the independent variable and the recall measures as the dependent variables. Significant differences were found for both free recall, $t(52) = 4.78$, $p < .001$, $d = .92$, and aided recall, $t(52) = 4.99$, $p < .001$, $d = .83$. Free recall of verbal information was significantly higher for appropriate displays ($M = 1.46$, $SD = .57$) than inappropriate displays ($M = .89$, $SD = .66$). Similarly, for aided recall, participants were able to more accurately

Table 2. Mean durations and frequencies for gaze measures.

		Political affiliation		
		Democrat	Republican	Independent
Appropriate displays	Mean duration (in seconds)	26.25 ($SD = 22.45$)	30.37 ($SD = 16.89$)	38.44 ($SD = 14.45$)
	Fixation frequency	15.47 ($SD = 12.99$)	16.50 ($SD = 8.52$)	20.64 ($SD = 6.74$)
Inappropriate displays	Mean duration (in seconds)	43.50 ($SD = 14.65$)	38.83 ($SD = 22.27$)	48.81 ($SD = 14.12$)
	Fixation frequency	23.90 ($SD = 8.81$)	22.61 ($SD = 11.14$)	26.12 ($SD = 7.16$)

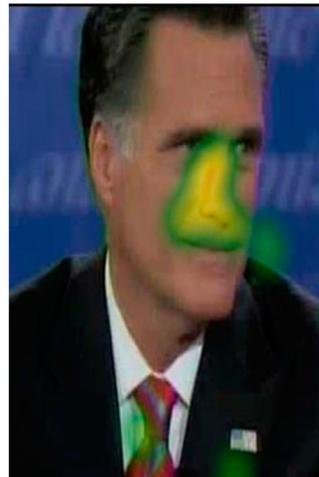
Obama – Inappropriate Condition**Obama – Appropriate Condition****Romney – Inappropriate Condition****Romney – Appropriate Condition**

Figure 2. Heat maps as graphical representations of fixation frequency.
 Note: Hot zones with higher color densities designate where viewers fixated more frequently.

answer questions about candidate statements from clips in the appropriate condition ($M = 5.20$, $SD = 1.43$) than in the inappropriate condition ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.73$). As predicted, memory for information in the verbal channel suffered when inappropriate nonverbal displays competed with verbal information for attention (Figure 3). Thus, hypothesis 3 was supported.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that partisanship (in-group identification) would moderate viewer evaluations of candidate display behavior such that political supporters would more favorably assess their own party's standard-bearer than the opposing candidate.

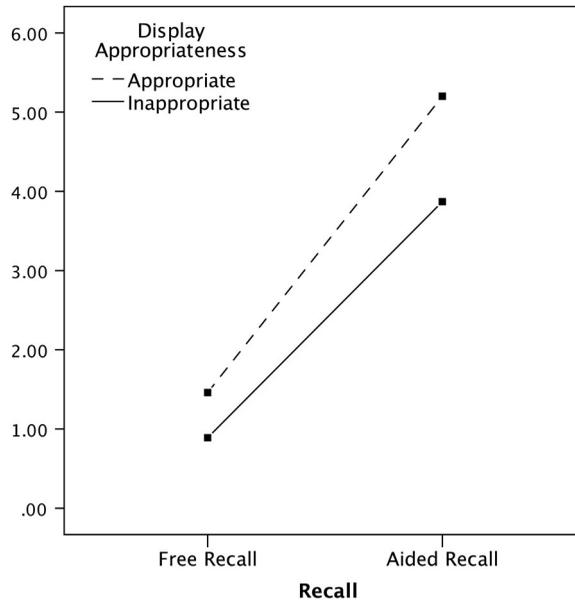


Figure 3. The impact of display appropriateness on recall.

To address this hypothesis, a 3 (partisan identification: Democrat, Republican, Independent) \times 4 (display appropriateness: Obama appropriate, Obama inappropriate, Romney appropriate, Romney inappropriate) mixed-measures ANOVA was conducted using candidate evaluation as the dependent variable. The partisanship by display appropriateness interaction was not significant, $F(6, 204) = 1.65$, $p = .14$, indicating that party identification did not moderate evaluation of candidate displays.⁴ A main effect of partisan identification on candidate evaluation was found, however, $F(2, 204) = 3.30$, $p = .04$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$.

Post-hoc analysis showed that when evaluating Romney's displays, Republicans showed no significant difference in evaluation from other party identifiers. Similarly, when evaluating Obama's appropriate displays, Democrats ($M = 4.32$, $SD = .37$) did not significantly differ from Republicans ($M = 3.86$, $SD = .26$) or Independents ($M = 4.56$, $SD = .25$; $p = 1.96$). When evaluating Obama's inappropriate displays, however, a significant difference between different party identifiers was found ($p = .023$), yet Democrats' evaluations ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.48$) were not significantly different from Republicans ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.01$, $p = .46$) or Independents ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 1.30$, $p = .14$). Rather, differences were primarily driven by discrepancies between Republicans and Independents (Figures 4 and 5).

To further examine Hypothesis 4, two multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to assess the contribution of strength of partisanship to candidate evaluations. No statistically significant results were found, indicating that assessments of display appropriateness are not contingent on partisan filtering. Thus, hypothesis 4 was partially supported, with differences identified only between Republicans and Independents.

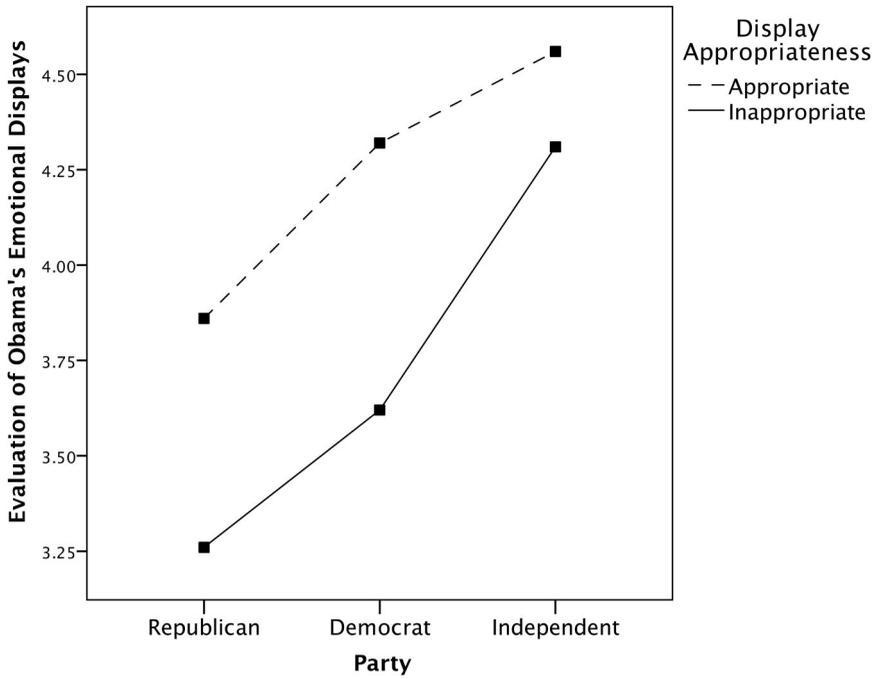


Figure 4. Evaluations of Obama's display appropriateness as a function of partisan identification.

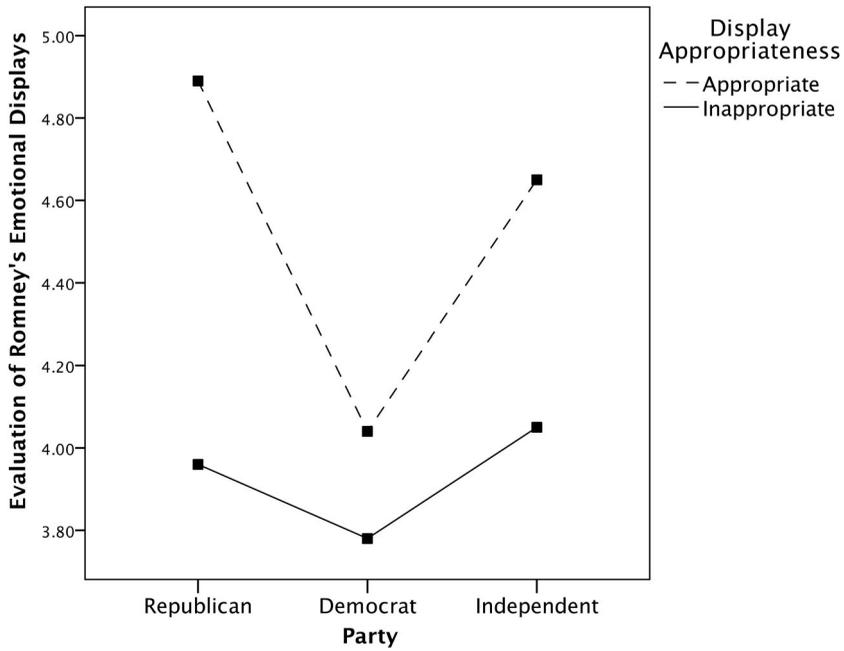


Figure 5. Evaluation of Romney's emotional appropriateness as a function of partisan identification.

Focus group analysis

To shed light on the experimental findings—specifically, to identify and discuss what viewers consciously notice when shown examples of appropriate and inappropriate nonverbal candidate behavior—a series of 10 focus groups was conducted with voting-age adults who agreed to participate in a study involving “memorable moments in televised politics.” The groups averaged five people in size. After a brief introduction, five short clips (mostly, presidential election highlights) that varied by group and averaged 1–2 min in length were shown to participants in randomized order for comment and discussion. Clips generally conformed to Clayman’s (1995) definition of a “defining moment” as a dramatic exchange thought to epitomize a political episode or event. These included, among other moments, Lloyd Bentsen’s charge that Dan Quayle was “no Jack Kennedy” in 1988; Hillary Clinton’s widely reported “emotional moment” during the 2008 New Hampshire primary; and, Rick Perry’s “oops” comment uttered when he could not recall the third governmental agency he would eliminate if elected in 2012. Regardless of clip shown, participants were asked a standardized list of questions (see the appendix) and were encouraged to offer their candid and honest assessment of the candidates’ performance, with the understanding that their comments would remain anonymous.

For this analysis, responses to the two best performing (i.e., most “appropriate” and “inappropriate”) clips from the experimental study were analyzed qualitatively. The two clips, from C-SPAN’s telecast of the debates, both featured Obama and Romney in a split-screen presentation. Each of these target clips was shown to each focus group, but in randomized order and interspersed throughout two or three other memorable moments from different election years.⁵ A 53 s excerpt from debate 1 starting at 36:16 represented the inappropriate condition, and a 70 s excerpt from debate 3 starting at 82:02 represented the appropriate condition. The groups were organized and conducted in the context of a graduate seminar in political communication and no incentive was offered beyond course credit for each moderator. Thus, opinions offered were voluntary and not made in exchange for payment.

Focus group participants were recruited by each student moderator from his or her personal social networks; specifically, the project instructions called for “convening a group of five or more people (family, friends, roommates, etc.) and focusing a conversation around the topic of memorable moments in televised politics.” As part of the study protocol, participants were asked to complete a brief questionnaire asking about political attitudes, media use, and demographic information. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 78 years ($M = 30.98$, $SD = 15.80$), with about two-thirds between the ages of 18 and 25. Among the 41 participants who completed a questionnaire, most were female (61%) and identified as conservative (56%). Consistent with the groups’ conservative orientation, average feeling thermometer scores (how warm or cold participants feel toward the candidates, with 0 representing very cold and unfavorable and 100 representing very warm and favorable) toward the major parties were higher for Republicans ($M = 62.30$, $SD = 25.39$) than Democrats ($M = 40.80$, $SD = 29.61$).

Themes emerging from the discourse

Overall, group discussion reinforced the evaluative findings from the experiment: a clip from the third debate showing an assertive and combative Obama was discussed as

much more appropriate and reassuring than a clip from the first debate, which depicted a demur Obama who shied from eye contact and appeared to smirk, while looking downward, in response to some of Romney's comments. Interestingly, some initial interpretations depended on clip order: when Obama's inappropriate clip was shown after an evasive and stone-faced Michael Dukakis from the 1988 presidential debates, for instance, Obama was at first rated positively in comparison to Dukakis. However, in comparison to his own performance in the third debate, Obama's performance in the first debate was judged more critically by focus group participants, and not just for ceding the floor to his opponent by refusing to visually engage Romney. As well, Obama was judged harshly for the way he was perceived as treating Romney. As Douglas put it, Obama deserved to experience a dip in the polls following his first debate performance, not because he appeared weak and ineffectual but

because of his body language and his attitude—it was like, “you don't know what you're talking about and I don't care what you have to say.” For me, he did not take what Romney was saying seriously. (Douglas)

Obama was unprepared. He came across like ... he could care less about what Romney had to say. (Leah)

Focus group participants articulated a two-sided view of Obama's inappropriate style from the first debate. First, they acknowledged that he seemed passive and disengaged, as widely reported in news coverage, a posture that clearly violated expectations. But also, and perhaps more interestingly, they criticized his nonverbal demeanor for seeming uninterested, dismissive, and disrespectful toward Romney—to the point of perceiving an element of sarcasm in Obama's expression. The phrases *unprofessional* and *unpresidential* were used in describing Obama's communication. “From a visual standpoint, I ... noticed that Obama was kind of smirking,” Francis observed. “That bothered me,” added Leah. “He needed an attitude adjustment.” The perception of sarcasm in a partial, downcast smile illustrates the sensitivity that viewers have to even small, incomplete expressions when shown in close up. Television amplifies the signal power of expressive displays and candidates, cast as *dramatis personae* in a staged event, tread along a performance tightrope when engaged in an extended televised discussion (Miller, 2001). When the camera is always on, perceptions of nonverbal incivility, even if unintended, can be discerned from the smallest of expressions.

In contrast, discussion of Obama's clip from the third debate reflected positive assessments of an engaged and assertive leadership style—one that conformed to expectations even while violating norms of polite discussion through interjection and speaking out of turn. Through such positive nonverbal expectancy violations, Obama's communication was uniformly viewed as appropriate and fitting to the rhetorical situation. Even as Romney held the floor and attempted to score points about his economic record and position (ostensibly supportive) toward the auto industry, Obama acted as a nonverbal auditor of Romney's comments and was quick to correct his opponent upon hearing a questionable claim or statement inconsistent with the historical record. Such active auditing and visual accounting of Romney by Obama was described by focus group participants as signaling dominance. “You've got one guy who is on the defense here [Romney] saying

stuff. And the other guy who is saying, 'No that's not what your words or the print says.' It's kind of obvious and easy that Obama is winning this," noted Kliff. "I think Obama derailed Romney quite a bit and kind of negated what he said," added Bob.

Discussion about Romney's performance in the clip from the third debate centered on the hurried pace and rehearsed quality of his statements. In Romney's rush to recite facts, viewers discerned an ill-at-ease attempt to command the stage by rotely filling the air with an unending reading out of rehearsed lines. "I think he could have cut out probably 50 percent of what he said and slowed down," observed Bob. Participants characterized Romney's rapid recitation of facts as having a defensive and inauthentic quality. "Romney came across as being very phony and he was clearly was just following a script and going through the motions," Donavin commented. "Obama, even with his few words, was able to keep [Romney] in the lane of being a governor versus being a chief commander of a nation," added Sarah. Viewers also noticed (again, without prompting) Romney's rapid blink rate, a sign of stress. When everyday citizens are given the opportunity to reflect on and share impressions of televised political encounters, small visual cues begin to speak loudly.

Consistent with other qualitative analyses of nonverbal communication, some participants expressed frustration with the inevitable attention that Obama's nonverbal style would receive over the more substantive aspects of policy debate. "People [are too] concerned about the characteristics and personality of the candidate in my opinion," Olive commented. Added Donavin: "I would say we still need to keep our focus on the issues, because body language can be deceptive."

Discussion

Understanding the influence of nonverbal expressions on candidate evaluations is important for several reasons. First, citizens rely heavily on television as a primary source of political information and television is a visual medium. Unless described by journalists, nonverbal behavior does not show up in the printed record; hence, when analyzing presidential debate dynamics, it is insufficient to examine candidate statements alone. Second, through the use of eye-tracking technology and focus group discussion, this study found definitive evidence that viewers of televised political encounters notice and respond to inappropriate nonverbal behavior. How candidates communicate is consequential. Third, nonverbal cues enable inferences about candidate traits (Olivola & Todorov, 2010), and traits are reliable predictors of candidate viability and success. The evidence in favor of considering nonverbal variables in political communication, and presidential debates in particular, far outweighs any arguments against.

As expected, inappropriate facial expressions elicited more attention in the eye-tracking experiment, and more critical commentary in the focus group discussions, than appropriate expressions. Indeed, experimental subjects visually attended to inappropriate displays 21% more frequently than appropriate displays. Statistical analysis confirmed that viewer responses were contingent on the appropriateness of the displays rather than partisanship or unique qualities of the candidates. These results provide further support for nonverbal expectancy violations theory: the violation of nonverbal expectancies by the candidates prompted viewers to allocate greater attention to the source of the violation, scrutinize

the violator more frequently, and negatively evaluate inappropriate and unexpected communication (see Burgoon & Hale, 1988).

Violations of nonverbal expectations by both candidates stimulated heightened attention and visual focus on the communicator, yielding more negative evaluations than appropriate displays. These findings are consistent with previous experimental research showing that displays that conform to expectations are evaluated much less critically (see Bucy, 2011). Additionally, considering that Obama mostly displayed nonverbal reactions toward Romney with very few words spoken in the stimulus clips presented, the results support the notion that nonverbal behavior has the capability to directly influence political evaluations independent of verbal considerations. Leader displays are evaluated in relation to the immediate communication context, where penalties or rewards for violations are assigned in relation to the rhetorical setting. Candidate expressions that are congruent or role-consistent with the immediate communication setting are deemed appropriate, whereas expressions that are inconsistent with the communication setting are viewed as inappropriate despite their seemingly innocuous quality.

Although appropriate nonverbal behaviors are often taken for granted in political communication, this study shows that display appropriateness is a moving target. There is not one particular type of nonverbal display that can be viewed as universally appropriate for all communication settings. In both the appropriate and inappropriate conditions, Romney exhibited positive nonverbal displays that varied in the authenticity and confidence with which they were expressed (Figure 1). In the inappropriate segments, Romney appeared somewhat nervous and uncertain of himself, leaking apprehension while attempting to convey reassurance. Not surprisingly, participants evaluated them differently from his more confident segments. When evaluating the appropriateness and evaluative consequences of televised leader displays, both the communication context and signal quality of the displays need to be taken into account.

From focus group discussion, we found that viewers are quite perceptive judges of candidate nonverbal behavior and responsive to changes in display efficacy. Exposure to just a minute or two of televised political exchange allows viewers to make fine-grained assessments of candidate performance, accurately identify who is more socially dominant and articulate reasons why, and infer a variety of trait characteristics based on observed candidate behavior. Focus group analysis also revealed a discrepancy in how everyday citizens interpret, and what they take away from, memorable debate encounters compared to press accounts of the debates. Whereas journalistic coverage of the first debate in particular emphasized President Obama's demur and lackluster demeanor, focus group participants detected a haughtiness and dismissiveness in Obama's lack of engagement, tinged with an element of sarcasm and lack of respect for Romney.

Contrary to recent research comparing the influence of verbal and nonverbal components in political debates that found the verbal dimension—at least in the German context—to have substantial influence on viewer evaluations (e.g., Nagel, Maurer, & Reinemann, 2012), this study showed when the verbal narration competes for attention with an inappropriate leader display, memory for the verbal information does indeed suffer. This finding is consistent with visual primacy and audiovisual redundancy research: as viewers concentrate attention, and thus cognitive resources, on the visual aspect of televised presentations, recall of verbal substance dwindles (Grimes, 1991; Lang, 1995). Another explanation from political psychology is that when facing complex message environments such

as political debates, viewers rely on heuristic cues as judgmental shortcuts to simplify the evaluation and decision-making process (Mondak, 1993). Nonverbal expressions that are unexpected and stand out as potential exemplars of candidate personality receive attentional priority. When prompted to engage in heightened scrutiny, viewers become highly attuned even to small breaches in candidate behavior and performance. This focused attention diverts resources from other aspects of message processing, and memory for factual recall suffers.

Counter to expectations, in-group identification, operationalized as a match between the candidate and viewer's political party, did not soften or mute the negative consequences of inappropriate displays. Although party labels and related political cues can provide shortcuts to the evaluation of political candidates, self-identified partisans did not evaluate their own candidate any more positively when judging a nonverbal expectancy violation. Thus, the tendency toward biased in-group evaluation was not observed in this study. This finding suggests that partisan determinations of communication efficacy are based more on the quality of the observed expression than on political interpretation.

While enhancing our understanding of political debate dynamics, this study points to several directions for future research. First, we narrowed our focus here to appropriate political behavior in the context of televised presidential debates. We did not consider display appropriateness relative to other political communication settings, such as crisis communication, economic developments, or public health issues. Second, the experimental portion of the study, and to some extent the focus groups, relied on college students as participants. Future research should involve participants that better resemble the voting population overall, in terms of age, education, geographic dispersion, and partisan identification, to enhance the external validity of the findings and enable more rigorous tests of partisanship. A third path to pursue are comparative tests of verbal and nonverbal communication on viewer learning, where memory and message resonance are positioned as key outcomes. Our findings show that inappropriate behavior is judged critically and interferes with retention of factual information but we did not test whether positive violations of nonverbal expectations (i.e., unexpected communication that makes a candidate more likeable or socially attractive) have the capacity to *enhance* memory.

Nonetheless, the findings from this research provide valuable insights into viewer responses to televised candidate behavior and demonstrate the utility of visual measures of attention in political communication. By employing a mixed-methods approach involving eye-tracking and focus group discussion, we probed the dynamic relationship between verbal and nonverbal behavior and found evidence that communication style does at times (and for good reason) take precedence over policy substance.

Notes

1. Similarly, "thin-slice forecast" studies have shown that judgments based solely on candidate appearance can predict election outcomes and spot "winners" with a degree of accuracy that reliably exceeds chance (Benjamin & Shapiro, 2009; Olivola & Todorov, 2010).
2. All debate video timepoints referenced in this study are derived from the official C-SPAN video archive website, available at the following URLs:

- Debate 1: <http://www.c-span.org/video/?308511-1/2012-presidential-candidates-debate>.
 - Debate 3: <http://www.c-span.org/video/?308547-1/presidential-candidates-debate>.
3. The time points for each stimulus clip were as follows:
 - Debate 1: Obama—inappropriate (00:36:04–00:38:04); Romney—inappropriate (1:24:31–1:26:28).
 - Debate 3: Obama—appropriate (1:21:43–1:23:41); Romney—appropriate (00:29:23–00:31:16).
 4. A separate 3 (partisanship) × 2 (display appropriateness) × 2 (candidate) ANOVA was run, also only showing a main effect for display appropriateness. These results confirm that visual attention was driven by display condition and not unique qualities of the candidates.
 5. A complete list of memorable moments clips shown in the focus groups, listed in the order shown, is available from the authors.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Zijian Harrison Gong  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7846-2366>

Erik P. Bucy  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4925-2244>

References

- Ballew, C. C., & Todorov, A. (2007). Predicting political elections from rapid and unreflective face judgments. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *104*(46), 17948–17953. doi:10.1073/pnas.0705435104
- Barry, R. J. (1982). Novelty and significance effects in the fractionation of phasic or measures: A synthesis with traditional or theory. *Psychophysiology*, *19*(1), 28–35. doi:10.1111/j.1469-8986.1982.tb02595.x
- Benjamin, D. J., & Shapiro, J. M. (2009). Thin-slice forecasts of gubernatorial elections. *Review of Economics and Statistics*, *91*(3), 523–536. doi:10.1162/rest.91.3.523
- Brewer, M. B., & Brown, R. J. (1998). Intergroup relations. In D. T. Gilbert, S. T. Fiske, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology* (pp. 554–594). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Bucy, E. P. (2011). Nonverbal communication, emotion, and political evaluation. In E. Konijn, K. Kovelung, & C. von Scheve (Eds.), *Handbook of emotions and mass media* (pp. 195–220). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Bucy, E. P., & Bradley, S. D. (2004). Presidential expressions and viewer emotion: Counter-empathic responses to televised leader displays. *Social Science Information/Information sur les Sciences Sociales*, *43*(1), 59–94. doi:10.1177/05390184040689
- Bucy, E. P., & Gong, Z. H. (2015). Image bite analysis of presidential debates. In R. X. Browning (Ed.), *Exploring the C-SPAN archives: Advancing the research agenda* (pp. 45–75). West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press.
- Bucy, E. P., & Newhagen, J. E. (1999). The emotional appropriateness heuristic: Processing televised presidential reactions to the news. *Journal of Communication*, *49*(4), 59–79. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1999.tb02817.x
- Burgoon, J. K., & Hale, J. L. (1988). Nonverbal expectancy violations: Model elaboration and application to immediacy behaviors. *Communication Monographs*, *55*(1), 58–79. doi:10.1080/03637758809376158

- Clayman, S. E. (1995). Defining moments, presidential debates, and the dynamics of quotability. *Journal of Communication*, 45(3), 118–147. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1995.tb00746.x
- Cowan, N. (2008). What are the differences between long-term, short-term, and working memory? In W. S. Sossin, J.-C. Lacaille, V. F. Castellucci, & S. Belleville (Eds.), *Progress in brain research: Vol. 169. Essence of memory* (pp. 323–338). Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Cupach, W. R., & Spitzberg, B. H. (1983). Trait versus state: A comparison of dispositional and situational measures of interpersonal communication competence. *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 47(4), 364–379. doi:10.1080/10570318309374131
- Exline, R. V. (1985). Multichannel transmission of nonverbal behavior and the perception of powerful men: The presidential debates of 1976. In S. L. Ellyson, & J. F. Dovidio (Eds.), *Power, dominance, and nonverbal behavior* (pp. 183–206). New York, NY: Springer-Verlag.
- Fiske, S. T., & Taylor, S. E. (1984). *Social cognition*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Furnham, A. (1982). The protestant work ethic and attitudes towards unemployment. *Journal of Occupational Psychology*, 55(4), 277–285. doi:10.1111/j.2044-8325.1982.tb00101.x
- Gerber, A. S., & Huber, G. A. (2009). Partisanship and economic behavior: Do partisan differences in economic forecasts predict real economic behavior? *American Political Science Review*, 103(3), 407–426. doi:10.1017/S0003055409990098
- Goman, C. K. (2012, October 4). Mitt Romney's body language wins first debate. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/carolkinseygoman/2012/10/04/mitt-romneys-body-language-wins-first-debate/>
- Grimes, T. (1991). Mild auditory-visual dissonance in television news may exceed viewer attentional capacity. *Human Communication Research*, 18(2), 268–298. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.1991.tb00546.x
- Hall, C. C., Goren, A., Chaiken, S., & Todorov, A. (2009). Shallow cues with deep effects: Trait judgment from faces and voting decisions. In E. Borgida, C. M. Federico, & J. L. Sullivan (Eds.), *The political psychology of democratic citizenship* (pp. 73–99). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Hassin, R., & Trope, Y. (2000). Facing faces: Studies on the cognitive aspects of physiognomy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78(5), 837–852. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.78.5.837
- Lamy, D., Carmel, T., Egeth, H. E., & Leber, A. B. (2006). Effects of search mode and intertrial priming on singleton search. *Perception & Psychophysics*, 68(6), 919–932. doi:10.3758/BF03193355
- Lang, A. (1995). Defining audio/video redundancy from a limited-capacity information processing perspective. *Communication Research*, 22(1), 86–115. doi:10.1177/009365095022001004
- Lanzetta, J. T., Sullivan, D. G., Masters, R. D., & McHugo, G. J. (1985). Emotional and cognitive responses to televised images of political leaders. In S. Kraus, & R. M. Perloff (Eds.), *Mass media and political thought: An information-processing approach* (pp. 85–116). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Malhotra, N., & Kuo, A. G. (2008). Attributing blame: The public's response to Hurricane Katrina. *Journal of Politics*, 70(1), 120–135. doi:10.1017/S0022381607080097
- Masters, R. D. (1989). *The nature of politics*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Mattes, K., Spezio, M., Kim, H., Todorov, A., Adolphs, R., & Alvarez, R. M. (2010). Predicting election outcomes from positive and negative trait assessments of candidate images. *Political Psychology*, 31(1), 41–58. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9221.2009.00745.x
- Meyrowitz, J. (1985). *No sense of place: The impact of electronic media on social behavior*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Miller, A. (2001, June). American playhouse: On politics and the art of acting. *Harper's*, pp. 33–43.
- Mondak, J. J. (1993). Public opinion and heuristic processing of source cues. *Political Behavior*, 15(2), 167–192. doi:10.1007/BF00993852
- Nagel, F., Maurer, M., & Reinemann, C. (2012). Is there a visual dominance in political communication? How verbal, visual, and vocal communication shapes viewers' impressions of political candidates. *Journal of Communication*, 62(5), 833–850. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01670.x
- Nagourney, A., Parker, A., Rutenberg, J., & Zeleny, J. (2012, November 8). How a race in the balance went to Obama. *New York Times*, p. A1.

- Noller, P., Gallois, C., Hayes, A., & Bohle, P. (1988). Impressions of politicians: The effect of situation and communication channel. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 40(3), 267–280. doi:10.1080/00049538808260048
- Olivola, C. Y., & Todorov, A. (2010). Elected in 100 milliseconds: Appearance-based trait inferences and voting. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 34(2), 83–110. doi:10.1007/s10919-009-0082-1
- Patterson, M. L., Churchill, M. E., Burger, G. K., & Powell, J. L. (1992). Verbal and nonverbal modality effects on impressions of political candidates: Analysis from the 1984 presidential debates. *Communication Monographs*, 59(3), 231–242. doi:10.1080/03637759209376267
- Poole, A., & Ball, L. J. (2006). Eye tracking in HCI and usability research. In C. Ghaoui (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of human computer interaction* (pp. 211–219). Hershey, PA: Idea Group Reference.
- Rudolph, T. (2003). Who's responsible for the economy? The formation and consequences of responsibility attributions. *American Journal of Political Science*, 47(4), 698–713. doi:10.1111/1540-5907.00049
- Seiter, J. S., & Weger, H., Jr. (2005). Audience perceptions of candidates' appropriateness as a function of nonverbal behaviors displayed during televised political debates. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 145(2), 225–236. doi:10.3200/SOCP.145.2.225-236
- Sniderman, P., Brody, R. A., & Tetlock, P. E. (1991). *Reasoning and choice: Explorations in political psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sokolov, E. N. (1963). Higher nervous functions: The orienting reflex. *Annual Review of Physiology*, 25, 545–580. doi:10.1146/annurev.ph.25.030163.002553
- Stanley, A. (2012, October 4). The choirboy and the headmaster, and a faceoff without fireworks. *New York Times*, p. A22.
- Stewart, P. A., Bucy, E. P., & Mehu, M. (2015). Strengthening bonds and connecting with followers: A biobehavioral inventory of political smiles. *Politics and the Life Sciences*, 34(1), 73–92. doi:10.1017/pls.2015.5
- Stewart, P. A., & Mosely, J. C. (2009). Politicians under the microscope: Eye blink rates during the first Bush-Kerry debate. *White House Studies*, 9(4), 373–388.
- Tilley, J., & Hobolt, S. B. (2011). Is the government to blame? An experimental test of how partisanship shapes perceptions of performance and responsibility. *Journal of Politics*, 73(2), 316–330. doi:10.1017/S0022381611000168
- Todorov, A., Mandisodza, A. N., Goren, A., & Hall, C. C. (2005). Inferences of competence from faces predict election outcomes. *Science*, 308(5728), 1623–1626. doi:10.1126/science.1110589
- Willis, J., & Todorov, A. (2006). First impressions: Making up your mind after a 100-ms exposure to a face. *Psychological Science*, 17(7), 592–598. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9280.2006.01750.x
- Yarbus, A. L. (1967). Eye movement during perception of complex objects. In A. L. Yarbus (Eds.), *Eye movement and vision* (B. Haigh, Trans.) (pp. 171–211). New York, NY: Plenum Press.
- Zebrowitz, L. A., & McDonald, S. M. (1991). The impact of litigants' baby-facedness and attractiveness on adjudications in small claims courts. *Law and Human Behavior*, 15(6), 603–623. doi:10.1007/BF01065855

Appendix. Focus group protocol

Questions for non-directed discussion

- After viewing this clip, what stood out to you—what did you notice?
- Any other general comments about the clip we just saw?

Questions for directed discussion

- What happened here—is this an example of effective communication or not? Please explain your answer.
- Do you think [the candidate] improved his standings in the polls because of this episode, or because of all the news coverage it might have received?
- Did anything appear unusual to you in the clip just shown? If so, does it raise legitimate concerns about the candidate in question or is it largely a distraction? (In other words, should we keep our focus on “the issues” instead?)
- Was the candidate right or wrong to behave in this manner—should he or she have gained or dropped in the polls on account of this performance?
- Do episodes like this raise legitimate concerns about the candidate in question or are they largely a distraction?
 - Should we focus on “the issues” rather than moments like this?
- What *are* the specific concerns raised by this clip?
- What impact does an episode like this have in terms of your outlook about the candidate or your willingness to support him or her?
- Does something like this have a long-term impact on your opinion of [the candidate], or is it relatively short-term where you see it and forget about it?
- Is there anything you would like to add about the clip we just saw?