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# Superior–Subordinate Communication in the Workplace: Verbal Aggression, Nonverbal Immediacy, and Their Joint Effects on Perceived Superior Credibility

Joseph E. Lybarger, Andrew S. Rancer, & Yang Lin

*This study examined the joint effects of a superior’s verbally aggressive behaviors and nonverbal immediacy behaviors on a subordinate’s perceptions of a superior’s credibility. Participants (n = 415) from intact classes were randomly assigned into one of the four experiment conditions simulated by four video segments: use of nonverbal immediacy and verbal aggression, nonuse of nonverbal immediacy and use of verbal aggression, use of nonverbal immediacy and nonuse of verbal aggression, and nonuse of nonverbal immediacy and verbal aggression. The findings indicate that superiors who do not use verbally aggressive messages and who are nonverbally immediate were perceived with a higher level of competence, trustworthiness, and caring than superiors who use verbally aggressive messages and who are not nonverbally immediate. In addition, superiors who use verbally aggressive messages and who are nonverbally immediate were perceived with the lowest level of perceived competence as compared to superiors in the other three conditions.*

**Keywords:** *Nonverbal Immediacy; Perceived Superior Credibility; Superior–Subordinate Communication; Verbal Aggression*

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Superior–subordinate communication is an exchange of information and influence among individuals of an organization, where the superior has formal authority to instruct and evaluate the task performance by other individuals (Jablin, 1979). A superior’s communication style is critical in the superior–subordinate relationship and is largely defined by his or her verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Verbal aggression represents one of the most common, albeit destructive, sets of verbal behaviors (Infante & Rancer, 1996), and nonverbal immediacy represents a set of constructive nonverbal behaviors respectively. Existing studies concerning the interaction between superior and subordinate tend to isolate and focus on one of these two types of behaviors separately, that is, *either* on verbally aggressive behaviors (Madlock & Dillow, 2012; Madlock & Kennedy-Lightsey, 2010) *or* on nonverbally immediate behaviors (Remland, 1984; Teven, 2007).

In reality, however, it is very likely for a superior to employ *both* verbally aggressive behaviors and nonverbal immediacy behaviors concomitantly because of the influence of his or her personality and communication traits and/or the situation in which he or she interacts with subordinates. As such, the nonverbal immediacy behaviors exhibited by a superior may heighten subordinates’ perceptions of physical and/or psychological closeness with the superior. Therefore, when the superior employs both verbally aggressive and nonverbally immediate behaviors at the same time, the nonverbal immediacy cues could serve to further intensify the negative impact of the superior’s use of verbal aggression. As a result, the *joint impact* of these two behaviors of a superior on subordinates’ attitudes toward, feelings about, and perception of the superior may be different from that of the presence of only one of these two types of behaviors. This study makes an attempt to examine the joint effects of these two factors on a subordinate’s perception of superior credibility.

### Perceived Superior Credibility

Perceived superior credibility has been linked to the concept of source credibility; perceived superior credibility is defined largely by the same major elements as those defining source credibility (Falcione, McCroskey, & Daly, 1978; McCroskey, 1992). *Source credibility* is defined as “the attitude toward a source of communication held at a given time by a communicator” (McCroskey & Young, 1981, p. 24), and it is a multidimensional concept, generally thought to consist of three dimensions: competence, character/trustworthiness, and caring/goodwill (McCroskey & Young, 1981; Teven & McCroskey, 1997). Falcione et al. (1978) indicated that perceived superior credibility is an important factor that affects subordinate satisfaction in organizations. If subordinates do not view a superior as credible, it is very difficult for them to develop trust for the superior (Teven, 2007). Without an appropriate level of mutual trust between a superior and his or her subordinates, many aspects of task performance and the efficacious functioning of the organization as a whole can be negatively affected.

### **Verbally Aggressive Messages and Perceived Superior Credibility**

Verbally aggressive messages include messages that attack an individual's character, competence, background, and physical appearance and include messages that intend to ridicule and threaten others. These types of messages can be characterized by the use of profanity, maledictions ("curses" or "jinxes"), teasing, and nonverbal emblems (i.e., displaying insulting gestures with the hands and/or body) (Infante & Rancer, 1996). At the workplace, some superiors are prone to being more verbally aggressive than others, specifically those who are predisposed to verbal aggression (i.e., those being higher in verbal aggressiveness). Research suggests that the higher the level of a superior's verbal aggressiveness, the lower his/her credibility on all three dimensions as perceived by subordinates (Cole & McCroskey, 2003).

### **Nonverbal Immediacy Behaviors and Perceived Supervisor Credibility**

Nonverbal immediacy behaviors include such physical behaviors as smiling, eye contact, proximity, body orientation, gesturing, vocal inflections, and appropriate physical contact while communicating; these behaviors help stimulate and influence individuals' responses in the process of communication (Andersen, 2012; Richmond, McCroskey, & Johnson, 2003). Kay and Christophel (1995) found that superiors' nonverbal immediacy behaviors can help improve subordinates' perceptions of superior communication openness, which, in turn, is positively related to subordinate motivation. Kelly and Westerman (2014) reported that positive relationships exist between superior immediacy behaviors and subordinate empowerment, motivation, and job satisfaction respectively; a negative relationship exists between superior immediacy behaviors and subordinate burnout.

Specifically, superiors who are perceived as more immediate (i.e., who demonstrate more nonverbal immediacy behaviors in interaction with subordinates) are seen as more credible (Richmond & McCroskey, 2004). Similarly, Teven (2007) also reported that the more nonverbal immediacy behaviors shown by a superior, the greater the perceived superior competence, the higher the perceived superior character, and the greater the perceived superior caring. At the workplace, increased superior credibility is significantly related to a higher level of subordinate motivation and job satisfaction (Richmond & McCroskey, 2004; Teven, 2007).

Taken together, studies conclude that the credibility of superiors, as perceived by subordinates, can be influenced by superiors' use of verbally aggressive messages; independently, other studies also find that the perceived credibility of superiors can be affected by their use of nonverbally immediate behaviors. While these findings are helpful, they are limited in terms of our understanding of the dynamics of superior-subordinate communication because superiors, intentionally or unintentionally, may engage in more than one kind of communication behavior in their interaction with subordinates in order to accomplish their objectives. Clearly, it is desirable to examine the joint effects of these two types of behaviors on perceived superior credibility. Specifically, given that the previously reviewed studies suggest that, for superiors, a lower frequency of employing

verbally aggressive behaviors and a greater use of nonverbally immediate behaviors are respectively related to a higher level of perceived credibility by their subordinates, the following hypothesis is offered:

*H1: Superiors who do not use verbally aggressive messages and who are nonverbally immediate will be perceived with a higher level of competence, character/trustworthiness, and caring/goodwill than: (a) supervisors who use verbally aggressive messages and who are nonverbally immediate; (b) superiors who use verbally aggressive messages and who are not nonverbally immediate; (c) superiors who do not use verbally aggressive messages and who are not nonverbally immediate.*

In addition, Kelly and Westerman (2014) and Kelly, Rice, Wyatt, Ducking, and Denton (2015) indicated that, with the presence of various factors that can possibly influence the dynamics of interpersonal interaction in a social context, the display of nonverbal immediacy behaviors by one individual may not be viewed positively by the other individual regarding the facilitation of constructive interaction between them. For example, the use of intense eye contact by a superior may be viewed by a subordinate as a “stare down,” which can increase the subordinate’s feeling of uneasiness. Therefore, given the presence of a high level of verbally aggressive messages used by superiors in an interaction with subordinates, their display of nonverbally immediate behaviors may help heighten the detrimental effects of verbally aggressive messages on their credibility as perceived by subordinates. Given this possibility, an additional hypothesis is offered:

*H2: Superiors who use verbally aggressive messages and who are nonverbally immediate will be perceived with a lower level of competence, character/trustworthiness, and caring/goodwill than superiors who are not nonverbally immediate and who either use or do not use verbally aggressive messages.*

## Method

### *Participants and Overview of Experiment*

Participants were 415 students from introductory communication classes at a large Midwestern University: 180 were male, 227 were female, and eight did not report gender. Their ages ranged from 18 to 59 years ( $M = 21.70$ ,  $SD = 5.69$ ). Twenty participants did not report age. There were 52 African Americans, nine Asian Americans, 312 Caucasians, seven Hispanic Americans, two Native Americans, and 13 identifying as “other” in the sample. Twenty participants did not report their race. Classes as intact units were randomly assigned into one of the four experimental conditions where different experimental stimuli (video clips) were used.<sup>1</sup>

### *Stimuli of Experiment—Video Clips*

A fictional situation where an employee was called into his manager’s office to discuss his job performance review was created to help develop four scripts for creation of the four video stimuli: The actor portraying the manager used/did not use verbally

aggressive messages, as well as used/did not use nonverbal immediacy cues. Two semiprofessional male actors were recruited to play these two roles in the video clips. A prestudy manipulation check was conducted to test the efficacy of the immediacy and verbally aggressive superior behaviors viewed in the four video clips. Table 1 describes the manipulations employed in the video clips to create the four experimental conditions.

**Table 1** Manipulation of Two Independent Variables: Verbal Aggression and Nonverbal Immediacy

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<b>Use of verbal aggression (What the superior said)</b>	
1. Physical/appearance attack	
	“Is this how you always fucking dress for work?”
2. Competence attack	
	“Your scores are extremely disappointing”
	“What the hell is wrong with you?”
3. Character attack	
	“You are a worthless slacker.”
4. Use of profanity	
	“Fucking.”
5. Threat	
	“If you don’t improve, I will make sure that you don’t work here again.”
6. Cutting off the subordinates responses	
<b>Use of nonverbal immediacy (What the superior did)</b>	
1. Eye contact	
	Looked up at the subordinate frequently; Looked at the subordinate in order to determine if he understands the problem; Maintained eye contact during the discussion.
2. Facial expression	
	Smiled at the subordinate.
3. Proximity/Personal Space	
	Sat close to the subordinate.
4. Vocalics	
	“Happy” inflection to voice
5. Touch	
	Touched the subordinate on the shoulder.
6. Gestures	
	Extended hand in a welcoming gesture; pointed at the report so the subordinate could follow.
7. Body orientation	
	Oriented body and chair toward the subordinate; leaned forward and toward the subordinate.
<b>Nonuse of verbal aggression (What the superior did not say)</b>	
	Absence of those expressions as identified in “Use of verbal aggression”
<b>Nonuse of nonverbal immediacy (What the superior did not do)</b>	
	Absence of those behaviors as identified in “Use of nonverbal immediacy”

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### Manipulation Check

A total of 158 participants (who were not a part of the participant pool for the actual experiment) from introductory communication courses at a large Midwestern university were randomly assigned via intact classes to view one of the four video clips and then were asked to indicate the amount of perceived nonverbal immediacy and verbal aggression used by the superior within the video clips by filling out a questionnaire that consisted of the Nonverbal Immediacy Scale (Richmond et al., 2003) and the Verbal Aggressiveness Scale (Infante & Wigley, 1986). Cronbach's alphas for these two scales were .85 and .82 respectively.

Results of independent-samples *t*-tests indicated that participants perceived the video condition where the actor portraying the manager used verbally aggressive messages ( $M = 21.35$ ,  $SD = 2.57$ ) as being significantly more verbally aggressive than the video condition where the actor did not use verbally aggressive messages ( $M = 13.20$ ,  $SD = 4.56$ ),  $t(154) = 13.64$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = 2.20$ . Results also indicated that participants perceived the video condition where the actor used nonverbal immediacy behaviors ( $M = 17.67$ ,  $SD = 2.93$ ) to be significantly more immediate than that of the video condition where the actor did not use nonverbal immediacy behaviors ( $M = 9.26$ ,  $SD = 2.31$ ),  $t(155) = 20.02$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = 3.19$ .

### Measures

The Source Credibility scale by McCroskey and Teven (1999) was modified to measure the perceived credibility for the superior. The original scale contains 18 items, using a 7-point semantic differential scale, and measures the three dimensions of credibility: competence, character, and caring. The scale was modified in order to reflect the context/situation viewed within the video conditions. Specifically, the items that assessed the caring dimension were removed from the scale, and Teven and McCroskey's (1997) Caring Scale was used in place of the removed items. Cronbach's alphas for these three dimensions were .84, .73, and .88 respectively.

### Results

In order to test the hypotheses, a  $2 \times 2$  between-subjects multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVAs) was performed on three dependent variables: the competence, character, and caring dimensions of perceived superior credibility. The results of the MANOVAs revealed overall significant effects from the interaction of the two independent variables on the three dependent variables, Wilk's  $\Lambda = .52$ ,  $F(9, 937.14) = 32.47$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial eta-squared = .20. Specifically, the results of the overall effects on "Competence" are:  $F(3, 387) = 22.83$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial eta-squared = .15; those on "Character" are:  $F(3, 387) = 39.92$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial eta-squared = .24; and those on "Caring" are:  $F(3, 387) = 95.03$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial eta-squared = .42 respectively.

As shown in Table 2, the results indicate that the mean scores of “Competence,” “Character,” and “Caring” for the experimental condition 3 are significantly higher than those for the experimental condition 1 and those for the experimental condition 2 respectively. Thus, H1a and H1b are supported. Furthermore, the mean scores of “Character” and “Caring” for the experimental condition 3 are significantly higher than those for the experimental condition 4, and there is no statistically significant difference between these two conditions regarding their mean scores of “Competence.” Thus, H1c is partially supported.

In addition, as seen in Table 2, the results suggest that the mean scores of “Competence” for the experimental condition 1 are significantly lower than those for both the experimental conditions 2 and 4. Although there is no statistically significant difference between experimental condition 1 and 2 regarding their mean score on “Character,” the mean score of “Character” for the experimental condition 1 is significantly lower than that for experimental condition 4. Furthermore, the results revealed that there is no statistically significant difference on the mean scores of “Caring” among the experimental conditions 1, 2, and 4. Therefore, H2 is only partially supported.

## Discussion

This study sought to explore how a superior’s use of verbal aggression and nonverbal immediacy together impacts on perceptions of a superior’s competence, character/trustworthiness, and caring/goodwill. The results support H1a and H1b regarding the three aspects of superior’s credibility: respectively, superiors who do not use verbally aggressive messages and who are nonverbally immediate will be perceived with a higher level of competence, character/trustworthiness, and caring/goodwill than supervisors who use verbally aggressive messages and who either are or are not perceived as nonverbally immediate. The results also partially support H1c in that superiors who do not use verbally aggressive messages and who are nonverbally immediate will be perceived with a higher level of competence and character/trustworthiness than supervisors who do not use verbally aggressive messages and who are not nonverbally immediate. Clearly, these results reveal that a superior’s use of *both*

**Table 2** Means and Standard Deviations of Competence, Character (Trustworthiness), and Caring (Goodwill) in Each of the Four Experimental Conditions

Experimental Condition	Competence	Character	Caring
Use VA/Use NI	18.48 (5.85) <sub>ade</sub>	17.93(5.26) <sub>ae</sub>	18.26 (8.51) <sub>a</sub>
Use VA/No NI	20.93 (6.23) <sub>bd</sub>	18.78 (4.87) <sub>b</sub>	17.84 (6.63) <sub>b</sub>
No VA/Use NI	25.35 (5.76) <sub>ab</sub>	25.66 (5.93) <sub>abc</sub>	34.05 (8.70) <sub>abc</sub>
No VA/No NI	23.40 (6.69) <sub>e</sub>	21.16 (5.63) <sub>ce</sub>	19.58 (7.64) <sub>c</sub>

Note. VA = verbal aggression, NI = nonverbal immediacy. Groups with the same subscripts are significantly different: a: at  $p < .001$ ; b: at  $p < .001$ ; c: at  $p < .001$ ; d: at  $p < .05$ ; e: at  $p < .001$ .

verbally aggressive messages and nonverbal immediacy will interact to create significantly different perceptions of his or her credibility. This finding indicates that a superior who is observed using nonverbal immediacy behaviors and not using verbally aggressive messages will be largely perceived as being significantly more competent, significantly higher in character, and significantly more caring. In addition, based on the conclusions drawn from the findings regarding H2, superiors who use verbally aggressive messages and who are nonverbally immediate will be perceived with a lowest level of competence.

This study finds that the dynamics of superior–subordinate communication can be influenced by whether a superior employs verbally aggressive messages and nonverbally immediate behaviors in his/her interaction with a subordinate. Specifically, the two salient communication behaviors in this situation, verbally aggression or nonverbal immediacy, do not simply exert their influence on the perceived superior credibility in an isolated manner. In fact, their joint effects on the perceived superior credibility are manifested in a unique pattern that is different from that created by either factor alone. Clearly, in terms of perceived superior credibility, a preferred situation (i.e., higher levels of competence, character/trustworthiness, and caring/goodwill) is for a superior to use verbal messages that are not aggressive in nature and employ nonverbal immediacy behaviors at the same time to interact with a subordinate. However, one situation in superior–subordinate communication can be more complicated than the aforementioned one. If a superior possesses a predisposition to be verbally aggressive, the employment of higher levels of nonverbal immediacy can create a detrimental effect on their perceived competence. In other words, although previous research has consistently identified a positive relationship between nonverbal immediacy behaviors and perceived source credibility (Schrodt & Witt, 2006; Teven & Hanson, 2004), a higher level of nonverbal immediacy may not always be desirable for perceived superior credibility. In fact, a superior who is verbally aggressive would benefit from refraining from using nonverbally immediate behaviors if the superior wishes to be perceived as more competent.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

One limitation is that student participants were randomly assigned to the different treatment conditions via intact classes. This suggests that this study should be considered as a “quasi-experiment” and not a *true* experiment. However, this was not likely to be a serious limitation that preempts the validity of the study. This assertion is advanced because the results of a one-way ANOVA showed no significant differences among the distribution of students in the four treatment conditions based on their ACT/SAT standardized testing scores,  $F(3, 289) = .506, p > .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .02$ .

To further enhance the understanding of the joint effects of verbal aggressive behaviors and nonverbal immediacy behaviors, other aspects of nonverbal immediacy behaviors (e.g., the intensity of employing those immediacy behaviors) can be

included as part of the experimental conditions in future research. Also, as Teven (2007) indicated, future research within this domain should go beyond the experimental conditions created in a controlled environment and utilize more diverse methodological approaches (e.g., field studies and in-depth interviews) to examine the dynamic relationship between superiors and subordinates at actual workplaces.

## Note

- [1] Demographic information regarding the experimental conditions: Condition 1 (Gender: 51 males, 53 females; Age:  $M = 20.66$ ,  $SD = 5.47$ ), Condition 2 (Gender: 33 males, 69 females; Age:  $M = 21.06$ ,  $SD = 4.96$ ), Condition 3 (Gender: 64 males, 37 females; Age:  $M = 20.47$ ,  $SD = 3.39$ ), and Condition 4 (Gender: 32 males, 68 females; Age:  $M = 24.73$ ,  $SD = 7.32$ ).

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