

Facial Displays of Emotion in Folk vs. Elite Advertisements

Jennifer S. Davis, Timothy Ketelaar, & Peter K. Jonason
New Mexico State University

FIGURE 1

Model's advertising folk and elite products were selected from brand websites



FIGURE 2

Faces were separated from websites and compared to six prototypical facial displays of emotion

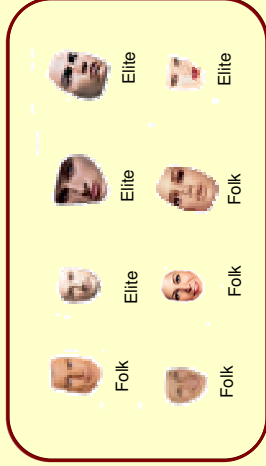
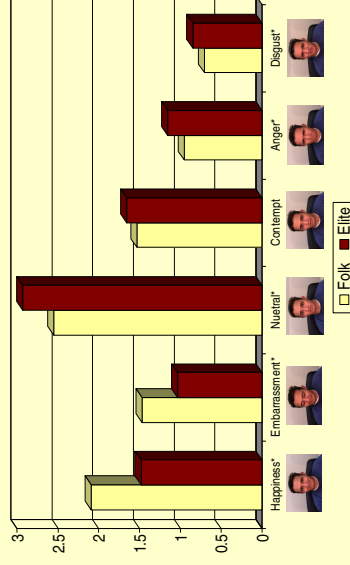


FIGURE 3

Mean ratings of similarity to each facial expression for folk and elite advertisements



Introduction

Previous studies have shown that facial displays of emotion can signal status or dominance in social contexts. Athletes lower in status and dominance are more likely to smile (Koenig & Ketelaar, 2007), and models exhibiting lowered brows are perceived as more dominant (Keating *et al* 1977). Facial displays of emotion are expected to signal status and dominance in advertisement of folk vs. elite status (see Miller, 1999) of consumer brands as well.

Purchase and display of folk or elite brands often signal social status or financial resource possession. Folk brands are below the average price for a particular product, while elite brands are above the average price for that product. Facial displays of emotion in brand websites advertising consumer products may be one way that advertisers convey the status of their product to potential consumers. Accordingly, we expect to observe different facial emotions in advertisements for folk products than for elite products.

Methods

Models advertising consumer products were randomly selected from the websites of different brands (Figure 1) and cropped to show only the model's face (Figure 2). The websites advertised men's and women's white collared shirts, v-neck sweaters, or glasses. Brands were classified as folk or elite according to the price of the product. Undergraduate participants (N=21) rated the similarity of the faces appearing on the brand websites to pictures of six prototypical facial displays of emotion using a six-point scale.

Results

Figure 3 displays the mean similarity ratings between folk and elite advertisements for six facial displays of emotion using a paired samples t-test. All differences between folk and elite product ratings were significant except for the contempt display.

Discussion

Facial displays that signal dominance and status have been documented in both human and non-human primates. The current study demonstrates that these facial signals are found in websites advertising consumer brands. Facial displays in elite advertisements were rated as more similar to the neutral, contempt, anger, and disgust expressions. Facial displays in folk advertisements were rated as more similar to the happiness and embarrassment expressions.

Results are consistent with findings of previous studies showing that lowered-eyebrow expressions (i.e. anger) may signal dominant social status (Keating *et al* 1977), while barred-teeth expressions (i.e. smiles associated with happiness and embarrassment) may signal submission or appeasement (Parr & Waller, 2006). As expected, advertisements for elite products featured more dominant facial displays of emotion than advertisements for folk products. These findings suggest that facial displays of emotion communicate strategic information to others.