

Researchers measure the value of a smile

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The polite smile as used in the experiment

(PhysOrg.com) -- Researchers at Bangor University have placed an economic value on a smile, demonstrating scientifically the effect that a genuine smile can have on our decision-making. The psychologists call this 'social information' and say that it has more of an effect than you may imagine.

Danielle Shore, a PhD student at the School of Psychology and the lead author of the research explains:

"Imagine you need a new car. What factors influence your choice? You might intend to base your decision on purely practical matters such as running costs and reliability, however new research shows that social factors, such as the salesperson's behaviour, play a bigger role than you think."

"If the salesperson gives you a genuine [smile](#) of pleasure, you will have a positive experience and be likely to buy a nicer car or more add-ons than you originally intended. Indeed, genuine smiles appear to act as a form of social currency, a

valuable reward that people will pay to receive," she explains.

The researchers examined people's responses to two types of smiles: genuine and polite. The feature that distinguishes these smiles is the presence of "laugh lines", the tiny wrinkles that appear at the corners of the eyes during genuine but not polite smiles. The authors designed an experiment in which students played a game against computerized 'opponents' with either higher or lower chances of winning money and who smiled either genuinely or politely. In the later stages of the 'game', the researchers measured people's preferences by asking them to choose their opponents. The results allowed the researchers to determine how valuable participants found each type of smile.



The genuine smile as used in the experiment

"The important finding in this experiment," explains Shore, "is that people preferred genuinely smiling opponents, even when they were associated with a lower chance of winning. We found this interesting because our participants, who were all university students, are usually highly motivated to earn

money. We expected them to prefer genuinely smiling opponents only when the odds of winning were equal. The fact that they chose opponents who were less likely to pay out was a big surprise."

Indeed, the researchers calculated the value of a genuine smile in the experiment at just over a third of a penny.

"This is a small amount, but imagine that you exchange 10 to 20 of these smiles in a short interaction. That value would add up quickly and influence your social judgment. So, the new car might seem a better bargain if a genuinely smiling salesperson sells it to you," suggests Dr Erin Heerey, the study's co-author.

According to Shore, this research has implications for how people make a range of important social decisions.

"Genuine smiles might help people see eye-to-eye during interactions. People who often make genuine smiles may have an easier time convincing others to adopt their goals. Because positive interactions help people build relationships, smiles might cement the social ties we share with our friends and colleagues."

Their research has been published in the journal *Emotion*.

Provided by Bangor University

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