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Interpreting Cues of Goodness: Thin Sliced Judgment of Malaysians and Chinese towards Political Leaders

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ABSTRACT
Thin slice studies have demonstrated that quick personality inferences of unknown others can be made fairly accurately. Utilizing focus group interviews, the current study examines thin sliced judgments and perceptions of six leaders in the context of goodness. Findings revealed that perceivers were able to form relatively accurate impressions of some leaders based on brief glimpses of nonverbal footage. Across all groups (Malaysian and Chinese) paralinguistic cues, dynamic cues and static cues were instrumental in the formation of positive perceptions of leaders in the context of goodness. These findings have implications for the areas of nonverbal behaviour, political communication, and personality judgement.

Introduction
The propensity to make inferences about others on the basis of very little information is fundamental in communication. We tend to make rapid judgement of people's character by primarily relying on nonverbal cues as opposed to verbal messages. Nonverbal cues refer to perceptible behaviours, such as facial expressions and vocal inflections – providing insight into the expressor's emotional states and attributes (Hall, Bernieri, & Carney, 2005).

The central role of nonverbal cues in social judgments, as well as the process of how people unconsciously and automatically make inferences about others (Bargh, 1997), has been widely acknowledged by scholars across disciplines (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992; Ambady & Weisbuch, 2010; Gray, 2008). Research has shown that our social judgments are not formed as a result of a conscious thought process or deliberation; rather, these judgments emerge automatically and unconsciously in a spontaneous manner (Bargh, 1997). Bargh has demonstrated through his research that people are able to judge others as good or bad in a split second, by merely glancing at a fleeting image of a phenomenon. The visual elements of nonverbal stimuli are processed in an extremely short period of time as opposed to auditory stimuli (Van Damme, Crombez, & Spence, 2009). In addition, this highly efficient system of automatic judgment is said to be primarily supported by specific cognitive mechanisms – extracting information essentially from nonverbal cues, with a particular reliance on the facial expression (Winston, Strange, O’Doherty, & Dolan, 2002).

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Social Judgement through Thin Slices

One of the prominent concepts within social judgement is thin sliced judgement, whereby quick judgement is based on the exposure of brief visuals, particularly on nonverbal cues (Ambady, 2010). Thin sliced research has provided extensive empirical evidence in support of accuracy in rapid impression formation of unacquainted others. A meta-analysis conducted by Ambady and Rosenthal (1992) provided empirical support for high rates of judgmental accuracy from thin slice exposure. Studies indicate that average people are able to make fairly accurate inferences about others in domains such as teacher effectiveness (Ambady, 2010; Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992), sexual orientation (Ambady, Hallahan, & Conner, 1999), perceived competence of congressional candidates (Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren, & Hall, 2005), etc. Moreover, average perceivers irrespective of culture are able to arrive at surprisingly similar spontaneous judgments about unknown others (Antonakis & Dalgas, 2009; Lawson, Lenz, Baker, & Myers, 2010; Rule et al., 2010).

The element of accuracy in spontaneous social judgments has increasingly received widespread attention by scholars across the spectrum. Ambady and Rosenthal’s (1993) groundbreaking study on thin sliced judgments pertaining to teacher effectiveness received a great deal of attention from research scholars across disciplines. Ambady and Rosenthal’s (1993) research revealed that teacher effectiveness can be accurately predicted by unacquainted students on various personality dimension scales based on brief nonverbal muted video clips. Further findings showed that deliberation and rational thinking actually diminishes the accuracy of spontaneous split-second judgments (Ambady, 2010). Todorov et al. (2005) investigated if politically naive individuals could predict electoral outcomes of congressional elections in the US. Participants of the study were asked to make rapid, unreflective judgments after viewing the candidates’ pictures for only one second. The findings of the study showed that inferences of competence based solely on static pictures could be made at better-than-chance levels. Studies relating to competence discernment at better-than-chance levels from static pictures of unknown politicians have been replicated in different cross-cultural contexts as well. A study by Poutvaara, Jordahl, and Berggren (2009) showed that Swedes and Americans were able to make fairly accurate judgments of competence about Finnish parliamentarians. In a similar study, Lawson et al. (2010) found that despite cultural differences, Americans and Indians were able to fairly accurately predict the electoral outcome of news democracies of Mexico and Brazil by relying on static images of congressional candidates. Rule et al. (2010) study added more richness in cross-cultural accuracy research by including a unique collectivist country – Japan. Naïve American and Japanese evaluators rated each other’s congressional candidates on Power traits (defined in terms of dominance and facial maturity) and Warmth traits (defined in terms of trustworthiness, and likeability). Consistent with previous findings, perceivers from both cultures arrived at similar trait inferences about political candidates across the divide. Cross-cultural consensus in thin sliced research demonstrates that “spontaneous and immediate reactions of universal emotions are often produced prior to the cultural reactions” (Hwang & Matsumoto, 2015, p. 50).

There are some studies that have questioned accuracy in impression formation. Rule, Krendl, Ivcevic, and Ambady (2013) examined whether people are able to accurately assess trustworthiness in others by looking at their faces. They showed the participants pictures of war criminals and war heroes and asked participants to rate them on their perceived
trustworthiness. Perceivers could not accurately distinguish between the war heroes and the criminals – leading to the conclusion that trustworthiness could not be accurately discerned from nonverbal facial cues alone. Kahneman (2011) has cautioned against relying extensively on rapid, intuitive judgments. He has categorized our mental process of thinking as system I and system II. System I is similar to first stage of person perception where we tend to make fast and automatic judgments about things, whereas system II is slow and logical – requiring deliberation. Kahneman is of the view that system I may lead to rapid and precise judgments, but the accuracy of these judgments can be affected by other factors, such as mood and motivation. Research has shown that unhappy subjects are not quite accurate in their decisions and judgments: when we are unhappy and uncomfortable, we get disconnected with our intuition (Kahneman, 2011). Furthermore, motivation also plays a role in accuracy. Studies indicate that perceivers who are more engaged and socially competent are generally more attuned to relevant cues leading to accuracy in judgments (Gray, 2008).

Previous work has examined many judgement domains including judgments of character and traits (Kihlstrom, 2010). Judgments of character and traits predominate above all other personality trait inferences in impression formation (Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014; Wojciszke, 2005). We tend to make judgments of others in order to avoid potential threats to our wellbeing (Goodwin et al., 2014). Past social judgement studies have examined the construct in a number of contexts such as: trustworthiness (Zebrowitz, Bronstad, & Lee, 2007), aggressiveness (Carré, McCormick, & Mondloch, 2009), intelligence (Borkenau, Mauer, Riemann, Spinath, & Angleitner, 2004; Zebrowitz & Rhodes, 2004), extraversion (Spain, Eaton, & Funder, 2001), and assertiveness (Schmid Mast, Hall, Murphy, & Colvin, 2003). Despite substantial research, not much is known on rapid social judgement formation via thin slices when it comes to perceiving goodness in political leaders.

**Perceiving Goodness in Political Leaders**

Scholars have noted that nonverbal behaviour of political leaders plays an important role in creating perceptions about their character (Kopacz, 2006; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). While the concept of goodness is one that is pertinent, there is no known research that explicates the conceptual domain of perceiving goodness. Related literature in person perception either assumes goodness to be a sub-component of morality (Wojciszke, 1994) or fails to clearly distinguish between a moral person and a good person – often treating them the same (Smith, Smith, & Christopher, 2007; Walker & Pitts, 1998; Wojciszke, 1994). One of the few studies that looks into this ambiguous domain is a study by Smith et al. (2007). Their study attempted to define a good person by asking participants from seven countries (individualistic and collectivist) to list prototypes/words that they can think of in relation to a good person. The dominant concepts associated with a good person were “benevolence”, “conformity”, and “traditionalism”. However, their study failed to explore the meanings associated with these broad concepts and provided little explanation into the participants’ frames of reference in making these associations.

**Objective and Context of Study**

The main aim of this study is to clarify the conceptual domain of the construct of goodness and uncover the process of thin sliced judgments and perceptions among lay citizens of
different countries but of relatively similar cultures when interpreting cues of goodness of political leaders. Collectivist cultures place great importance on moral interpretation when it comes to judging others (Wojciszke, 1997). The current study includes collectivist cultures of China and Malaysia, which have been identified as embodying a collectivist philosophy – characterized by interdependent communal affiliations, harmony, and reliance on nonverbal signals to communicate interpersonal information (Kennedy, 2002).

To achieve the main objective, we will look into how lay Malaysians and Chinese perceive goodness and the nonverbal cues that contribute in discerning goodness through thin sliced judgement. While nonverbal cues are important in all cultures, they are presumed to be more prominent in collectivistic cultures that practice high-context communication. In high-context communication, a large part of the meaning of a message is embedded in the physical context, which includes facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures (Jogulu & Ferkins, 2012; Kennedy, 2002; Sueda, 2014). Hence, it is expected that in collectivistic cultures, the reliance on nonverbal cues is heightened in order to understand messages – which should result in increased accuracy when making rapid thin sliced judgments of unknown others.

Findings from this study will advance theoretical understanding of the conceptual domain of the construct of goodness and the process of rapidly discerning goodness based on nonverbal cues in collectivistic cultures, particularly in Malaysia and China. The study findings pertaining to how the politically unsophisticated (laypersons) perceive politicians based on thin-sliced impressions will provide invaluable insights to the student of politics and communication.

Prior work on thin sliced paradigm has almost exclusively relied on quantitative methods – making broad claims about accuracy without delving into the process. This study will be the first of its kind to explore thin sliced paradigm qualitatively – examining the what, whys, and hows of social judgments in the context of goodness. This methodological variation has attempted to extend research on thin sliced studies not just by asking whether people are able to make accurate judgments of goodness about unknown others, but by delving deeper – allowing the participants to articulate their thought process for the first time when making such evaluative judgments (Appendix).

Specifically, this study posed the following research questions:

RQ1. To what extent are lay citizens from Malaysia and China able to make relatively accurate thin sliced judgments of perceived goodness of political leaders?

RQ2. How do nonverbal cues influence perceptions of goodness of leaders among lay citizens from Malaysia and China?

Methodology

This study utilized focus group interviews to examine thin sliced judgments and perceptions of leaders in the context of goodness. A Thin slice is “a brief excerpt of behaviour sampled from the behavioural stream, less than five minutes in length” (Ambady, Laplante, & Johnson, 2001, p. 90). Further, “thin slices can be sampled from any available channel of communication, including the face, the body, audio clips, tone of voice clips, transcripts or combination of these”, and these slices of behaviour “are typically rated by naïve (untrained) judges” (Ambady, Bernieri, & Richeson, 2000, p. 90).
Participants and Procedures

A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants for the study. In order to choose suitable participants for this study, three criteria were applied. Firstly, only those participants were eligible to participate in the study who were completely unfamiliar with the political leaders chosen for the research. Only those students were recruited who didn't recognize any leaders – to ensure that there was no familiarity bias. Secondly, since this study was also interested in exploring whether there is a cross-cultural consensus with regard to the universality of social judgments – participants of the study comprised of Malaysian and Chinese undergraduate and graduate university students. All study participants were enrolled at a public university in Malaysia, where the primary researcher is also pursuing her doctoral studies. Hence, it was relatively easy to recruit Malaysian students on campus. The Chinese students recruited for this study hailed from mainland China and were also studying in the same university. Chinese participants were included in the sample to examine if there were similarities across the two communitarian cultures in their interpretation of goodness – enabling the researcher to make stronger claims about the study findings in the collectivist context. And lastly, only those students were selected who were able to comfortably express their views in English – since the moderator of the focus group sessions was not well versed with Malay or Chinese.

The total number of participants chosen for this study were 32. Twelve focus group sessions were conducted (six sessions in phase 1 and six sessions in phase 2) – three focus groups comprising of Malaysian students and three groups of Chinese students, ranging between four to eight respondents. Male and female participants were evenly split among the groups. Study participants were briefed about the nature of the study and a consent form was signed, prior to the focus group session. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality of all the study participants.

In the first stage, a preliminary study was conducted (three groups of Malaysian participants and three groups of Chinese participants) to gain understanding about the notion of goodness. Participants’ narratives emerging from the group discussions helped unravel the meanings and associations related to the notion of goodness. After identifying how goodness is understood and interpreted by the participants, the researchers could proceed to the main phase of the study: interpreting cues of goodness in thin slices of nonverbal behaviour.

Malaysian and Chinese participants (again the same participants from phase 1 – three Malaysian focus groups and three Chinese focus groups) in a group setting separately viewed thin sliced clips of the politicians and were asked to make rapid impressionistic judgments about the target stimuli, with a particular focus on the goodness element, followed by a detailed discussion about their judgments and criteria. Six politicians were selected to be shown in the sliced clip – three on the right side of the binary and three on the left side. “Imran Khan”, “Jose Mujica”, and “Hugo Chavez” were on the right side of the binary discussion in the media in terms of their social welfare/altruistic policies, their popularity reported in surveys/polls and international recognition and rankings. “Slobodan Milosevic”, “Ariel Sharon”, and “Hosni Mubarak” had been designated to be on the left side of the binary based on negative media discourse relating to war crimes and human rights violations. Following Ambady’s (2010) thin sliced technique, 10-s silent video-clips for each of the politicians had been compiled together as 1 masterclip. The 10-s clip was inclusive of the first, the middle, and the end part of the speech. In addition, the video had been grey scaled to neutralize
any colour-associated bias. To ensure homogeneity, only those video-clips were selected where all the political leaders were: (a) standing alone on stage, (b) wearing formal suits, (c) speaking in a formal capacity, and (d) delivering a speech in indoor settings.

In order to avoid groupthink, the moderator of the focus groups also made use of “NGT” – Nominal Group Technique – to ensure that all participant views are equally represented. Study participants were shown the thin sliced clip twice utilizing the NGT format. In the first viewing, participants were asked to quietly write down their impressions of the politicians based on their nonverbal demeanour without any discussion. In the second viewing, participants again were asked to view the thin sliced clip and this time evaluate politicians’ goodness – “whether the person/s on screen exudes goodness or not”. Both these stages required a strict adherence of the NGT format in order to form independent judgments. Participants were instructed to form immediate impressions and were told not to deliberate. Once all the participants finished writing, the moderator of the focus group session opened the floor for discussion with regard to the judgments made by the participants – as to what nonverbal cues did they rely on to make evaluative judgments of the political leaders and so forth.

Each focus group session lasted around one to one and a half hours. All six sessions were digitally recorded and transcribed immediately after the session was over. Each session was fully transcribed by the primary researcher. The process of coding was inductive, which, according to Patton (2002), entails “discovering patterns, themes, and categories in one’s data” (p. 453) based on the overarching research question posed by the study. The researcher immersed herself in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts – followed by open and axial coding of the data-set. This process allowed the researcher to identify common themes and patterns that emerged from constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which calls for arranging data in a manner which facilitates systematic comparison across the data-set (O’Connor, Netting, & Thomas, 2008).

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness of the study findings was established by participant validation and peer debriefing. Participants were asked to go over the focus group interview transcripts to validate if what has been recorded is in accordance with their stated views. The majority of the participants went through the transcripts and found no discrepancies in the recorded and written data.

In order to further lend credibility to the study, peer debriefing was also used to verify the process of data analysis and interpretation. For this study, two PhD scholars – one from the department of communication and the other an expert in the field of qualitative research examined and oversaw the data analysis process – providing constructive feedback on the codes, categories, and themes derived from the focus group interview data. The feedback received from them helped to further fine-tune and refine the analysis – enhancing the rigour of the study.

**Findings: Phase 1**

Before commencing with the main study concerning thin sliced judgments and perceptions of leaders in the context of goodness, a preliminary study (phase 1) was conducted to gain
clarity regarding the notion of goodness among Malaysian and Chinese respondents. The preliminary findings concerning goodness revealed that Malaysian and Chinese respondents by and large defined goodness in terms of concern for others. This recurring theme was labelled as “concern for others’ welfare”. Additionally, Malaysian and Chinese groups made extensive references to nonverbal cues which they associated with goodness. These were categorized as: deciphering goodness in dynamic cues, deciphering goodness in static cues and deciphering goodness in paralinguistic cues.

**Concern for Others’ Welfare**

When we have goodness inside us, we help others. (Patrick, Malaysian participant).

The first thing that I can think of is caring and kind hearted – not selfish … like you think about everyone. (Lily, Chinese participant)

A dominant theme that cut across both the Malaysian and Chinese groups was their unequivocal belief that “goodness” emanates from being considerate and helpful to others. This recurring narrative was echoed across the spectrum in varying capacities. When posed the question: “what is goodness to you?” most participants considered altruistic disposition and selflessness as central to the notion of goodness. Malaysian and Chinese participants explained goodness by citing examples of individual who: “do a lot of charity work”, “involved with public welfare”, “think about others”, “contribute to society”, and “care for others”, etc.

**Deciphering Goodness in Dynamic Cues**

Dynamic nonverbal cues comprise facial expressions (which includes smiles and eye behaviour), gestures, and postures. These are considered dynamic due to their changeable nature. For example, when a person speaks his/her movements in facial expressions, gestures, and posture may change according to the context during an interaction. Study participants alluded to a number of nonverbal signals which they attributed with goodness. Most of them emphasized the smile and eye behaviour. Santana, a Chinese participant, commented, “I think first thing to recognize if a person is good or not is the smile”. Mary, a Malaysian participant, also contended, “When you are sitting in a subway and you see a person coming towards you – if the face expression is smiling then we feel, ‘Oh, this person is giving positive aura, positive expressions to everyone … he’s a good person”’. Yana (Chinese participant) acknowledged the significance of eyes in deciphering goodness in others. She asserted that one can glean others’ purity of intentions through their eyes and eye contact. Alex, a Malaysian student, equated goodness with sincerity and was of the view that eyes were a direct window to gauge one’s goodness.

**Deciphering Goodness in Static Cues**

Static nonverbal cues are less dynamic in nature and do not change during the course of an interaction. Physical attributes (height, looks, age, race, etc.), dressing/attire, adornments, and environment are all included in this category of nonverbal communication. Appearance was heralded by both Malaysian and Chinese participants as a major indicator of goodness. Discussion about appearance centred on clothing, presentable appearance, and, to a smaller
degree, physical attributes (in particular, looks). Bat (Malaysian participant) highlighted the importance of looks and clothing in making inferences of goodness, “I would look how they look like, what clothes they wear … things like that”. Zena (Chinese participant) also emphasized the same, “Clothing can give information … It can tell whether a certain person is good or not”.

**Deciphering Goodness in Paralinguistic Cues**

Paralinguistic cues in nonverbal communication refer to the nuances evident in speech, such as variation in tone, speed, intensity, and pauses between words and sentences. Malaysian and Chinese participants spoke about paralinguistic cues in relation to goodness. Zena (Chinese participant) talked about a famous person who she believed manifested goodness because of his vocal nuances. She stated, “His tone of voice is always slow. By just listening to his voice you can see that he’s not power hungry … he’s very kind”. Similarly, Keith (Malaysian participant) asserted that “a good person speaks calmly and not in an aggressive way”.

**Phase 2: Thin Sliced Judgments and Perceptions**

After we gained an understanding about the notion of goodness, phase 2 of the study allowed us to examine thin sliced judgments and perceptions in the context of goodness. Study findings pertaining to accuracy in thin sliced judgments of perceived goodness in political leaders were not as uniform and near unanimous as compared to previous studies utilizing the thin sliced approach. Nevertheless, Malaysian and Chinese focus group participants formed strong judgments (positive and negative) of the selected political leaders based on brief glimpses of nonverbal footage. When probed to provide rationale for such strong impressions, focus group participants explained their evaluations by discussing their nonverbal demeanour at length. The results are arranged by grouping data based on each political leader.

**Thin-Sliced Perceptions of Imran Khan**

He stands very straight and he opens his arms … very open like that (imitated the gesture) very stretched out, like the person who gives announcement to all the world – that kind of person, like a captain of a ship.

Lay Chinese perceivers in all the three groups evaluated Khan as a person who exuded goodness. Lay perceivers from Malaysia, although less in numbers in terms of affirmative judgments on Khan’s perceived goodness, formed strong positive perceptions nevertheless.

**Enhancers of Perceived Goodness**

Most of the lay perceivers from Malaysia and China focused on Khan’s paralinguistic cues (pace and pauses in speech), followed by static (looks) and then dynamic cues (eyes) in making positive thin sliced evaluations in the context of goodness. Lily, a Chinese participant, observed, “He thinks before he talks … he had space between the sentences. I like those kind of people. I think they respect the audience”. Malaysian participant Sasha also noted, “He is a good person because when he speaks he’s not too angry, he seems very
careful about what he speaks”. Zoya (Chinese participant) alluded to Khan’s appearance and remarked, “He’s kind of handsome, but not those kind of young and very handsome who are not reliable. He’s kind of stable so you might trust him”. Other participants commented on his eye behaviour and associated it with goodness. Miranda, a Chinese participant, said, “From his face, his eyes, I can feel that he’s under huge stress… seems like a serious problem – he wants to solve it. He wants to be good – stand for everything good”. Similarly, a Malaysian participant named Patrick remarked, “From his eyes you can see that he’s very attentive when he was speaking. His look was intense … intense looking to his audience, so I think he’s a good person”.

**Diminishers of Perceived Goodness**

Many lay Malaysian perceivers did not see Imran Khan as someone manifesting goodness. Most of them referred to Khan’s physical appearance cues as diminishers of goodness. Khan’s looks reminded Bat of a movie star in a villainous role, she stated, “He looks like he’s from a movie, he’s like the villain”. Mary also alluded to the same, “He’s very charismatic but he doesn’t show any goodness, because for me I don’t like trouble … I think he’s bringing trouble because he is charismatic”.

**Thin-Sliced Perceptions of Jose Mujica**

He’s very passionate about whatever he’s saying … so I feel like he’s a good person because to have that kind of passion you have to be honest.

Many lay Malaysian and Chinese participants perceived Jose Mujica as someone who manifested goodness. Mujica garnered a lot of attention and was readily recalled, unlike other leaders owing to his use of gestures.

**Enhancers of Perceived Goodness**

Most of the lay perceivers from Malaysia and China cited gestures and harmony in body language when explaining their positive appraisals concerning Mujica’s perceived goodness. Wendy (Chinese participant) alluded to his passionate style and construed it favourably, “He has a lot of hand gestures, he wants to tell something because he has the confidence … he can make others feel excited”. Malaysian participant Wani said, “I think he’s good because he’s quite serious about something that’s why he cares about it, which is why he really shows his emotion until he can’t control”. Lee (Malaysian participant) alluded to the synchrony in movements as a positive nonverbal indicator signifying goodness, “When he speaks, the movements follow him – so everything is in balance, so you could see goodness through this movement”.

**Diminishers of Perceived Goodness**

Those perceivers who did not evaluate Mujica positively primarily cited “excessive gesturing” and “too much body language”. Sasha (Malaysian participant) stated, “I don’t trust him, the facial expression and gestures are very harsh”. Lily (Chinese participant) asserted, “His facial expression are very strong and there’s no stop with the hand movement”. She added, “if we use it (gestures) for a certain period it’s fine but if it lasts for the whole process then it’s mad”.

Downloaded by [eFada - UAE] at 04:35 08 August 2016
Thin-Sliced Perceptions of Hugo Chavez

I focused on his face when he speaks something. I think he may be saying something really important… he must explain it – very powerful… the look was powerful.

Hugo Chavez did not inspire strong positive appraisals in either Malaysian or Chinese groups. Judgments related to his perceived goodness were pretty much split evenly across the groups.

Enhancers of Perceived Goodness

Malaysian and Chinese perceivers who made positive thin sliced impressions of goodness, mostly referred to harmony in body language and gestures in Chavez’ case. Lee (Malaysian participant) contended, “I feel like he’s correcting something… he wants to point out something that’s bad. I can see through that because when he’s pointing, his mouth was moving the same way with the gestures… so for me he’s a good person”. Santana (Chinese participant) focused on gestures, “I noticed more of his hands. It’s good because movement of the hands can attract audiences’ attention – personally I may trust him”.

Diminishers of Perceived Goodness

Lay perceivers from Malaysia and China made references to Chavez’ eye behaviour and gestures to explain their negative appraisals. Zena (Chinese participant) observed that “he didn’t look at anyone. He’s not looking at people straight in the eye, he is looking at them like this (lowered her head with eyes lowered with a defiant/menacing look) – not looking straight… something not very good”. Valerie (Malaysian participant) mentioned gestures and remarked, “While he’s talking he’s pointing at people. I think the body gesture is too harsh and close to commanding”.

Thin-Sliced Perceptions of Ariel Sharon

He is stern – pretty much hard core. He doesn’t give much thought to others… It’s about him.

Malaysian and Chinese focus group participants were near unanimous in forming negative thin sliced impressions about Ariel Sharon – evaluating him unfavorably on perceived goodness.

Diminishers of Perceived Goodness

Lay perceivers from Malaysia and China relied on multiple nonverbal cues while discussing Sharon’s overall impression. Lily (Chinese participant) alluded to paralinguistic cues to explain her negative evaluation, “He kept talking and you see no pause in his speech… not very considerate about the audience. It’s like his solo show or something”. Malaysian participant Frasia, made a similar comment in relation to Sharon’s apparent disconnect with the audience. She said, “He just looks as calm as a water. It’s kindda like he’s listening but doesn’t really… it looks calm, but it doesn’t look like he’s making effort in terms of connection”. Malaysian and Chinese perceivers increasingly cited weight as a diminisher of perceived goodness. Zoya, a Chinese participant, remarked, “He is fat, rich and, powerful, but often these kind of people have something behind”. George labelled Sharon as “corrupt” on the basis of weight gain alone and related weight gain with making money through corruption.
Helen (Malaysian participant) noticed the eye behaviour and the manner of speaking and concluded that there was no harmony in his overall nonverbal behaviour, “I noticed the way he talks … he has these lazy eyes that do not speak (correspond to) whatever he’s saying … he looks like he’s actually shouting (exaggerated movement of the mouth to imitate)”. 

**Thin-Sliced Perceptions of Slobodan Milosevic**

He is a bit calm and creates a sense of stability.

The Majority of Malaysian perceivers across all three groups with the exception of few, formed *inaccurate* thin sliced consensus judgments with regard to Milosevic’s perceived goodness. Chinese focus group participants were divided in their appraisals concerning Milosevic.

**Enhancers of Perceived Goodness**

Limited gesturing and facial expressions were considered by many lay perceivers as positive indicators in the context of goodness. Malaysian perceivers drew comparison between Milosevic and Chavez. Natalie, for example said, “He [Milosevic] is a soft guy because his face doesn't look as stern as the first one [Chavez] … he looks like a normal guy”. Lily also drew comparisons and remarked, “The other one [Chavez] is like that (exaggerated gestures) and this one is like this (minimal gesturing)”. Chinese participants’ positive inferences were influenced by face and eye behaviour. Alexis stated,

> I noticed his eyes brows and eyes, I think a little bit sad … I feel he has goodness because once in the video I noted worry (in the face), like he feels sad about something – which means such a person has conscience and compassion about something.

**Diminishers of Perceived Goodness**

For Milosevic, few Malaysian perceivers were able to make accurate thin sliced judgments. However, the ones who made those accurate evaluations had the most profound things to say. Keith, a Malaysian participant, described Milosevic as “calm” like most of his peers, but for Keith that calmness denoted something unnerving, “The second one [Milosevic] is calm and the facial expressions are firm … like when he’s looking at the audience it’s quite scary …”. Chinese participants made similar observations. Terrence said, “I don’t trust the second one [Milosevic] … the face doesn’t emote any emotion – that means that these kind of people always cover up something”.

**Thin-Sliced Perceptions of Hosni Mubarak**

He has no expressions … there was nothing in the face … his body was motionless.

In evaluating Hosni Mubarak, most of the lay perceivers in the three Malaysian groups and many members from the Chinese groups formed negative perceptions with regard to Mubarak’s perceived goodness.
**Diminishers of Perceived Goodness**

Lay perceivers who made accurate thin sliced appraisals about Mubarak primarily observed face and eye behaviour (dynamic cues) and facial features and hairstyle (static cues). Liya, a Malaysian participant explained her unfavorable impression of Mubarak and stated, “He’s calm, analytical, and cunning. The reason why I say cunning is because you can see the way the hair is cut, it’s very well-trimmed. His gaze is threatening and the hair cut is too trimmed”. Natalie recalled Mubarak as someone who had a “cartoonish face” which made it difficult for her to trust him. Feeha, in another focus group expressed similar views, “I think he just looked mean. The black hair and the sharp nose… he reminds me of one of the old Dracula movies, he looks like that – ready to bite you”. Mubarak’s apparent lack of connection with the audience also influenced the negative judgments. Alex commented, “He was only looking at the text (paper) not making eye contact with the audience”. Chinese participants also alluded to same. Lily noted, “I don’t see very much eye contact with the audience and his face shows that – I don’t think he thinks about or cares about others, he just likes speaking for himself”. Miranda compared him with Mujica and said that “less emotion was expressed from his [Mubarak] eyes, face and movement. So you cannot judge his real feeling – unlike the fifth one [Mujica]”.

**Enhancers of Perceived Goodness**

The few lay perceivers who made positive thin sliced appraisals about Mubarak primarily focused on eye behaviour (dynamic cues). Mubarak’s lack of eye contact and immersion in the text was construed in a positive light by some. For example, Mary (Malaysian participant) stated, “He was looking at the text, talking slowly… he was being very moderate”. In a similar vein, Wang, a Chinese participant, also positively appraised Mubarak’s speech delivery (looking at his speech notes) and referred to it as “scientific” and “systematical”. She remarked, “He’s doing his speech in a way like using statistics to crack data to convince people. It is good for the active audience”.

**Discussion**

This study explored whether lay perceivers were able to make fairly accurate thin sliced judgments of goodness about unknown others based on brief glimpses of nonverbal behaviour. More specifically, the study endeavoured to uncover the thought processes involved in these sliced impressions – as to what kind of nonverbal cues do perceivers rely on to make such spontaneous appraisals. These research questions were probed in the political context and the study participants comprised of lay Malaysian and Chinese perceivers.

Prior studies dealing with thin sliced paradigm have made bold claims about the accuracy of thin sliced judgments (Ambady, 2010; Ambady et al., 1999; Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993; Todorov et al., 2005). The current study findings concerning accuracy in thin sliced judgments is somewhat inconclusive. Focus group participants’ narratives were not entirely consistent across the spectrum. However, if the group narratives are examined separately then the study can make cautious claims about accuracy in thin sliced judgement domain. Judgments about the political leaders’ perceived goodness were deemed accurate and inaccurate based on the criteria stated in the methods section.

For the Chinese focus groups, Imran Khan across the board was seen as a person who exuded goodness, since 13 out of 14 participants perceived him as someone who reflected
goodness through his nonverbal demeanour. Additionally, several Malaysian and Chinese focus group participants perceived Jose Mujica as someone who manifested goodness. For Hugo Chavez, both Malaysian and Chinese groups were not able to form significant affirmative judgments pertaining to his perceived goodness.

Focus group participants from Malaysia and China were able to form consensus judgments on Ariel Sharon. Lay perceivers across both the groups made relatively accurate thin sliced judgments about Sharon – evaluated negatively on perceived goodness. With regard to Slobodan Milosevic, lay perceivers especially from Malaysia made inaccurate positive appraisals – almost unanimously judging him as someone who manifests goodness. Perceptions relating to Hosni Mubarak were somewhat accurate and unanimous across the spectrum. Across all the groups, paralinguistic cues (pace and pause in speech), dynamic cues (gestures and face/eye behaviour) and static cues (appearance/features and age) were found to be instrumental in the formation of accurate perceptions of goodness based on thin slices of nonverbal behaviour. The researchers venture to make the following propositions in relation to the study findings:

1. Fairly accurate thin sliced judgments in the context of goodness can be made when perceivers are able to discern “multiple nonverbal cues” – dynamic, static, and paralinguistic cues.
2. When forming impressions of goodness, observing “harmony” in body language (synchrony in gestures, facial expressions, and vocal inflections) can lead to accuracy in thin sliced judgments.
3. Nonverbal cue of “gesture” has the most recall value when participants are asked to elaborate on their thin sliced perceptions of others.
4. Pronounced use of “gesturing” is by and large interpreted negatively among Malaysian and Chinese perceivers owing to their collectivist orientation – which looks down on behaviours that might disturb harmony in social settings.
5. “Eye contact” is considered an important criterion in making positive thin sliced evaluations of unknown others in the context of goodness.
6. “Facial features” can impact thin sliced judgments pertaining to goodness.
7. Vocal nuances in speech, in particular “pauses” in speech weigh heavily in making positive thin sliced evaluations of unknown others in the context of goodness.
8. Contextual factors, such as settings, mood, and motivation can impact accuracy in thin sliced judgments.

Implications and Future Directions

This study makes novel contributions in terms of methodological variation, generation of new literature and expansion of previous research – having practical ramifications. In terms of methodological variation, this study has extended research on thin sliced studies by exploring this paradigm qualitatively. Doing so has resulted in unraveling the process of thin sliced perceptions – allowing the researcher to tap in to the participants’ frames of reference for the very first time. By broadening the scope of thin sliced paradigm, this study will hopefully lead to more research in further exploring and refining this design.

Above-chance accuracy in thin sliced research has been a ubiquitous claim among leading scholars of thin slice studies (Ambady, 2010; Ambady et al., 1999; Ambady & Rosenthal,
The inherent limitation of the current study in terms of its sample size inhibits the researcher in making grand generalizations. That said, the contradictory patterns emerging from this study (in terms of above-chance accuracy) should spark scholarly discussion and debate – raising interesting questions about above-chance accuracy in thin sliced judgments – warranting further exploration. Additionally, future studies can also be conducted by using quantitative surveys which will help in making more generalizable claims for both Malaysian and Chinese samples.

The most novel aspect of this study has been its contribution in generating new knowledge on goodness. Most of the related literature fails to clearly distinguish between a moral person, a good person, and moral traits – often treating them the same (Smith et al., 2007; Walker & Pitts, 1998; Wojciszke, 1994). This study ventured to examine the notion of goodness holistically, by first exploring the meaning of goodness as interpreted by the study participants, probing the nonverbal dimensions associated with goodness (cues that communicate goodness to others); ascertaining the extent to which above chance accurate thin sliced judgments of goodness can be made by lay perceivers; and most importantly, identifying nonverbal behavioural cues of goodness that influence positive and negative thin sliced appraisals of unknown others. We hope that the narratives emerging from this study will further understanding about the notion of goodness and also contribute in developing a coherent definition of goodness and indicators of goodness – which is conspicuously lacking in the current literature.

Data generated on the enhancers and diminishers of goodness in the context of person perception provide incisive observations with regard to the significance of nonverbal nuances in impression formation. The commonalities and differences in the interpretation of nonverbal cues of unknown others across the two collectivist samples, sheds new light into the frames of reference of lay Malaysian and Chinese perceivers – contributing notable insights to intercultural and cross cultural communication research. Nonverbal cues have not been studied in the context of spontaneous discernment of goodness in unknown others. This study expands the literature on nonverbal communication and further underscores the centrality of nonverbal communication in person perception.

The study findings related to thin sliced perceptions of goodness have provided keen insights with regard to the nonverbal signals associated with goodness – as conceived by lay Malaysian and Chinese perceivers hailing from collectivist cultures. This study has broadly used the term “collectivist cultures” (Andersen, 2012; Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1989), however, the main focus of this research is the East Asian/Southeast Asian block of collectivist countries. In this study, Malaysian and Chinese cultures (owing to their collectivist orientation) have been presumed as having common characteristics without much difference – this can be construed as a possible limitation of the study. Having said that, the researchers would like to contend that the findings also revealed that Malaysian and Chinese perceivers had more similarities than differences in their conceptions concerning the notion and indicators of goodness. Hence, the claims made by the study have an embedded collectivist context. A natural extension of this study would be to further gather data from other collectivist countries (in particular, from the East Asian/Southeast Asian block) in order to make stronger claims about the study findings. Additionally, follow-up studies should examine this notion from individualistic perspectives as well in order to attain a more fine-tuned understanding about goodness.
The positive and negative inferences of politicians based on thin slices of nonverbal cues have great relevance from a political communication standpoint. Research findings concerning thin sliced judgments and perceptions of politicians should spur more interest in studying rapid impression formation of other political leaders in the context of goodness and other relevant constructs. The current study did not include any female political leaders – a gap that should be addressed in further investigation in order to gain a richer perspective concerning impression formation in the context of goodness. In terms of practical implications, policy pundits, and lobbyists can use this kind of data to get a feel for how lay audiences perceive certain political candidates which might be low profile and accordingly decide if they want to field a certain politician for the big leagues or not.

This study should help in bridging the disciplinary gaps and promote “cross fertilization between fields” (Hecht & Ambady, 1999, p. 166) owing to it multidisciplinary scope – having relevance for political scientists and psychologists alike. The conceptual framework of the study is primarily guided by concepts originating from the field of psychology – thin sliced paradigm and person perception. It is hoped that this study has contributed in bringing forth new perspectives to light in the context of social judgments – adding value to the existing literature.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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References


Appendix

Findings – Thin-sliced Judgments of Goodness

In response to the question “Does this person exude goodness or not?” participants indicated the following; wherein Y = Yes and N = No:

Malaysian Focus Groups I, II and III.

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