

Abstract

The use of inexpressive body language in marketing is common. For instance, high fashion advertisements often feature models that appear distant and devoid of emotion and various brands align themselves with inexpressive icons such as James Dean. This practice seems to suggest that marketers believe this imagery is appealing and effective. The literature, however, suggests that inexpressive and detached behavior is evaluated unfavorably, which raises questions about the effectiveness of this imagery in marketing.

The purpose of this research is to develop a theoretical framework for understanding the appeal of inexpressive body language and to identify marketing contexts in which imagery of inexpressive body language is preferred by consumers. The theoretical framework was tested across three controlled experiments. The results support a James Dean Effect: that an inexpressive appearance is especially appealing for individuals with countercultural attitudes, but only when the inexpressive individual is understood to be free from social constraints. The final experiment demonstrates that understanding the relationship between inexpressiveness, counterculturalism, and social constraint can enhance the effectiveness of marketing communications.