

# Locking Eyes With Strangers

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## ABSTRACT

*The topic of reactive body language and eye contact between strangers is necessary research because it differs from typical face to face relational interactions. Stranger interactions among genders and one's eye contact are often avoided by most people, whether it's due to the setting, awkward feelings, or one's vulnerability. It seems like there is a common communicative trend found in Late Generation Y and Early Generation Z, is avoiding eye contact with strangers when outside of one's comfort zone (Nemko, 2016). The lack of stranger interaction involving eye contact and its effect on society is considered in this study. The researchers chose to investigate how eye contact between strangers differs in today's society. Specifically, the researchers explored the effect of eye contact in different settings and compared that with race and gender. Participants of the study hailed from a private, faith-based institution of higher education in an urban area in the Midwestern United States. The study thoroughly addressed the relationship between how one averts their eyes because there is an uncomfortable feeling. The lack of eye contact can show a lack of empathy towards the other person; they may go through their day feeling as if they don't exist.*

## PURPOSE & OVERVIEW OF CONTENTS

The natural reaction from interacting with strangers is a common topic of research and analysis, and yet there is still so much to be learned. As the society evolves, so does the means of interaction with others. With technological advances and media driving our society as a new form of communication, patterns and style of human face to face interaction is changing and nearly becoming nonexistent. Experiencing avoidance as a reaction to these changes in society affects not only the younger generation of millennials but everyone. The topic of reactive body language and eye contact between strangers is necessary to research because it differs from typical face-to-face relational interactions. Stranger interactions among genders and one's eye contact are often avoided by most people, whether it's due to the setting, awkward feelings, or one's vulnerability.

Preliminary research pertains to different aspects of eye contact but more research is necessary regarding the reactional differences between males and females. A common communicative trend found in with late Generation Y and early Generation Z is avoiding eye contact with strangers when outside of one's comfort zone; "Direct eye-to-eye contact is replaced by screen-focused gaze, and the spatial relationship between bodies is apparent rather than real' (Nichol & Watson, 2000. Pg 138). The study explored the relationship between eye contact and context of strangers. The rate of distance and avoidance people go through to disengage when interacting with strangers is discussed and examined. The frequency of stranger avoidance as related to distance and setting is also examined. Working under the belief that stranger interaction is an unpopular way of communication outside of a person's home, the reactive levels of those who prefer to glance away or not respond is investigated. The lack of stranger interaction versus eye contact and its effect on society is explored in this study. With all

these factors taken into account, this study examined the reactions between strangers through minimal eye contact.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Reactions*

Verbal and nonverbal reactions in everyday life is a normal occurrence and it's something society depends on in their interactions with others to physically read how that person feels. For example, waving to someone and receiving a smile back physically might read that this person is happy; or greeting someone and receiving no eye-contact in response, physically might read that the person is uninterested. In one study by Jones & Foshay (1984), they set up an experiment of greeting strangers without direct eye-contact, but simply a glance in their direction. This leaves the individual feeling conflicted and left with mixed reactions, wondering whether or not to respond without looking foolish; having not known if the greeting was actually directed towards them or not. The study indicated that the responsibility and risk to respond back from the stranger being greeted were both low and that that could have affected the results of the study. Although there was no significant difference between receiving a response from an individual compared to a response from a group of two; they were more likely to respond than a larger group of four or more.

### *Setting*

Eye contact and reactions thereafter tend to depend on the setting in which it is taking place. For example, in a job interview, eye contact is expected and reciprocated while in everyday situations, like public transport, it is often avoided. Newman & McCauley (1977) set out to test if the quality of social interaction differs between people in cities, suburbs and small towns. There tends to be reduced quality of social interaction between people in a big city as

opposed to those in smaller towns. These findings could be a result of the overload of the average city-dweller or other variables such as politeness, suspicion, or helpfulness.

In regards to public transportation, there seems to be an unspoken rule to avoid eye contact and stay in your personal bubble (Kim, 2012). Bryner (2012) explores why people don't want to sit next to other strangers on a city bus or a public subway. She then ran an experiment where she took Greyhound buses to see the measures commuters will go to so they can avoid interaction with strangers. "If the bus isn't full, don't sit next to someone else, that's weird." (Bryner, p. 35) Strategies within avoiding eye contact and interaction would be: Pretending to be busy, checking phones, rummaging through bags, etc.

#### *Distance*

Within reactions and settings from eye contact, there are other factors, such as distance. When studying people and the effects of stranger interaction, distance plays a big role. It lets the researcher look into the group's dynamics on how comfortable they are in body language with interacting with each other. Senju and Johnson (2009) found that eye contact serves as a number of different functions in two-person encounters. Their research showed that people move towards a certain distance to adopt a certain level of eye-contact as a result of that, there were less eye-contact and glances were shorter between the two pairs.

#### *Avoidance*

Jones and Foshay (1984) manipulated eye contact, they focused on the likelihood of a greeting being returned by strangers when there is no eye contact involved. Using the situation of being greeted without direct eye contact leaves the individual conflicted in whether or not to respond, without looking foolish having not known if the greeting was directed towards them or not. The results of the study show that the larger the group, the less likely for a response back with both eye contact and verbal reply.

When walking down the street and noticing someone who appears to be homeless regardless of the circumstances, our instinct is to turn our heads. This avoidance of eye contact can be for a number of reasons. One averts their eyes because there is an uncomfortable feeling. The lack of eye contact can show a lack of empathy towards the other person, they may go through their day feeling as if they don't exist; being constantly ignored and looked down upon. It could very well be that all they need is someone to notice them, to look into their eyes, and maybe even to listen to them. Very few of the homeless have had someone give them their undivided attention. When one looks into their eyes and give them a moment of time, there is affirmation of their dignity. With a lack of empathy, one fails to understand the deep and unsustainable way the homeless live, it is easy to overlook these complexities. (Cleypool, 2016)

### RESEARCH QUESTION

When looking at individuals who enter into society, interacting with strangers can or be avoided and unacknowledged. Evidence shows that eye-contact serves as a number of different functions in two-person encounters, of which one of the most important is gathering feedback from others reactions (Senju, 2009). This study focused primarily on the reactions to eye-contact through stranger interaction, while also exploring other variables, such as distance, setting, and avoidance.

*RQ1: How will the reactive body language after eye contact with strangers differ between age, gender, and culture in everyday encounters?*

After reviewing related research on the topic, the researchers hypothesized that eye contact cross-culturally, Western and Eastern, would play a role in how comfortable people are

with eye contact. In addition, the researchers hypothesized that age would not play a factor in the results of the research, but gender will play a more significant role.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Participants*

One hundred eighty-two students attending a small, private Midwestern Lutheran University have been surveyed. Participants included college aged students (18-30 years old) and of mixed backgrounds in ethnicity, gender, majors, and job occupations. The survey data collected was then divided into various data groups based on demographic information gathered. This helped to create data analysis to compare survey data across multiple demographics. To assure that the participant's confidentiality will not be compromised, participants involved were kept anonymous by assigning numbers and not names.

### *Surveys*

The survey sent out to the participants had a reverse funnel format, it began with a set of three demographic questions; including gender, which age group they fall under, and their cultural background or ethnicity they identify with. The following question was a close-ended question, asking participants to gauge the scale of how individuals feel about community, using a Likert scale. The next questions were open-ended, to gather responses on how individuals react to eye contact and when they initiate eye contact.

First, the surveys were sent out via school email on Survey Monkey; with a 3% response rate, the surveys were then printed and distributed on campus. Participants were approached by group members to increase the number of respondents. In combining the Survey Monkey results and paper surveys, the total number of participants increased to 182 people surveyed. Out of the 182 participants, there were 40% male and 60% female that were surveyed [Fig.1]. The majority age group of the participants were between 18 years old to 22 years old at 82%, the following

ages being most common were 27 years or older at 9% and the least likely age group of participants were between the ages of 23 years and 26 years old a 8% [Fig.2]. Analyzing the race of participants, the majority surveyed were White or Caucasian at 55%, the second majority was Asian or pacific islander at 20% , then next with Black or African American participants at 15%, Hispanic/Latino participants and Native American/Indian participant's close in percentage at 2%, and the remaining other races not defined at 4.4% [Fig.3]. The breakdown graphs of gender, age, and race from those surveyed are illustrated in the Appendix A below in Figures one, two, and three.

## RESULTS

A portion of the undergraduate student body of the university was surveyed asking 16 questions to determine if there was reactivation in body language after eye contact with a stranger while comparing the variables of age, gender, and culture. The researchers wanted to uncover if people were comfortable with making eye contact in everyday encounters with strangers in familiar and unfamiliar settings. Of the 350 undergraduate students who were administered the survey at the university in Fall of 2016, 186 participated in this study by responding to the survey (a response rate of 53%). Of those 186, 66 participants conducted their surveys online, the remaining 120 participants surveys were conducted face to face. Only two participants did not qualify for the research because they had not agreed to the consent form. This left the remaining 182 surveys (52%) completed to be accepted into the study. The results of the qualified surveys were then analyzed.

First, the researchers compared participants' responses by culture, to see the exact response rate based on culture. The data suggests that there is a difference in the reaction eye contact between individuals of differing races. In analyzing the results from a question about

reactional behaviors (Appendix B, Fig. 4), Caucasian individuals with European descent tend to have more varying behavior, perhaps depending on the context of the situation at hand. While Asian cultures have a higher frequency to look away or pretend they are busy, this could be due to the cultural beliefs about eye contact.

While conducting the research, the data suggests that most male and female participants answered the same way. The survey results rejected our hypothesis, for the most part. One answer set stood out as different from all the others, with varying results between genders. The following graph (Appendix B, Fig. 5) shows the data responses from a question about the reactional responses from the individual when coming into contact with a stranger.

Age definitely played a role throughout the study. One specific survey question showed a significant difference in answers through the different age groups. The graph (Fig.6) shows the responses from individuals regarding their positions on interacting with strangers in public, in which you can see the oldest aged surveyors (ages 27 and up) have the highest percentage of the least comfortable interacting with people.

## DISCUSSION

### *Equilibrium Theory*

Developed in 1965 by Dean and Argyle, Affiliative conflict theory or Equilibrium theory investigates how communicators adapt to different levels of gaze due to physical proximities as well as investigated similar behaviors of intimacy due to the need of affiliation based on normative levels of cultural background. Eye contact is a big part of how we communicate nonverbally; it's an important part of building interpersonal relationships. In everyday experiences, today's society often forgets to acknowledge the environmental and social factors that influence the way we interact with others, mainly, through eye contact. "People use others'



eye movements to regulate conversation, to make character judgments, and to gain insight into their internal mental processes” (Itakura, McCarthy, Muir, Lee, 2006, para. 1).

The question of how people respond to eye contact requires thought. Of the qualified surveys, 29.4% replied they felt “very comfortable” with eye contact. The researchers found only 3.3% of respondents said they were “very uncomfortable” with eye contact. A majority of participants replied, “somewhat comfortable” with 50%. When asked about the appropriate length of maintaining eye-contact with others, only 29% indicated that this should be done “full time”. Breaking down the results by the three races, White, African American, and Asian participants, the majority that maintains eye contact full time is African Americans at 32%, leaving White and Asian at a tie 27%. By answering the question of the ‘appropriate length’ to hold eye contact, the researcher then cross-tabulated the question to analyze the effects of breaking eye contact and how it correlates with the “appropriate length” the three races agreed with. The results show that African Americans rarely break eye contact with the person they are interacting with at 14.2%, whereas White and Asian Americans were both under 8%.

Dean and Argyle state that communicators adapt gaze and use it to base the need of affiliation with another, our results show that a majority of people feel comfortable with eye-contact and maintaining eye contact with others, showing that this theory does indeed apply to our findings.

On the topic of parental upbringing and cultural backgrounds between Eastern (Asian cultures) and Western (White and African American) cultures, according to G.M. Kapalka (2004), parents should encourage and seek out eye contact with their children at early ages and administer consequences with children who aren't compliant. In Western culture, phrases such as, “Look at me when I’m talking to you” is a way of demanding eye contact when in

conversation with others; or “can’t you see that I am talking to you” is often a response of annoyance when someone feels they aren’t getting the attention they deserve. Limited to no eye contact can be seen as disrespect towards the conversationalist or an act of disregard in conversation, when people seek out eye contact from others by asking, it can foster respect through conversational units.

### *Uncertainty reduction theory*

This theory focuses on human communication and how it’s used in gaining knowledge and creating understandings by reducing the uncertainty factor when meeting or interacting with others.

In Eastern countries, it’s more common to demonstrate no eye contact and show your submission to a conversation by looking down or elsewhere. Looking at an experiment done by Gilliam and Van Dan Berg, they conducted the differences between Caucasian Americans (CA) and African Americans(AA) where after interviews and cross examinations were done the study conducted had an AA person interview a CA person, vice versa, the results showed that when an AA person wouldn’t reciprocate eye contact with CA person, the CA would feel uncomfortable; whereas AA felt content regardless of eye contact or lack of. The same study was conducted again by Gilliam and Van Dan Berg with individuals from Asian countries; they were found to look down when responding to the question, showing that looking down is perceived as polite and being respectful. (1980). When conducting the survey, researchers asked the question to the university participants, ‘how comfortable are you with eye contact’ (Q13), data suggests that Asian participants were ‘very comfortable’ at 13%, whereas White and African American participants were 35% comfortable.

According to the theory, Berger states that communication is a means to reduce uncertainty with one another. Our results, looking at different cultures, showed that eastern

cultures, Asian Americans, were more comfortable with eye contact than the other races, White and African American combined. The results are interesting since the study conducted by Gilliam and Van Den Berg showed that East Asian cultures are less comfortable with eye contact and prefer looking down as it is a sign of respect.

Connecting to cultures and how they view eye contact; in Eastern cultures, avoidance of eye contact is a sign of respect or deference (Akechi, et al. 2013). Maintaining eye contact varies cross-culturally. In Western cultures, eye contact in interaction is considered more important when interacting with one another than in Eastern cultures. In western societies, people that come into contact with strangers feel more comfortable making eye contact than if they didn't. In particular, females feel the need to use a non-verbal to acknowledge another person (Appendix B, Fig. 5).

With this theory, it is known that some communicative acts increase uncertainty, whereas others can decrease it or make it go away entirely. One study by Afifi and Burgoon found that was done looked at the attractiveness of the person who was doing the communicative acts, or the violator (2000). With the thought that people who are more attractive than others a set of predictions can be made, for example, that one person can cause uncertainty in another just by the way they look. While interacting with someone who is considered physically attractive there may be a shift in the conversation that neither participant may even notice. So by collecting this data an outside observer should track the interaction. If the participants were to track their interactions they would have different observations because they may not notice a shift in their conversations. (Nisbet, Wilson, 1977).

People who start to act diversely tend to cause more uncertainty in others. People feel more secure towards others that share the same traits as them. So when another person starts

talking differently this will be viewed negatively, and possibly as obnoxious. (Kellerman and Reynolds. 1990). Connecting this to the current study, people become uncomfortable in different settings. So when eye contact is made people have different responses to it, if it's a different setting than the person is used to the uncertainty will arise and the person may try to avoid eye contact with others. Once eye contact has been made a person may feel the need to smile, or nod at the other person. If they seem strange or different than the first person though the second person may attempt to look busy to avoid any interaction. Although individuality can be viewed positively in other situations while trying to meet new people it is encouraged to act "normal". Not standing out or doing anything that could draw unwanted attention to someone or a group. This is to help make connections with others, and although it may appear uncomfortable it is to ensure that relationships may be developed and flourish.

#### *The Attribution Theory*

The Attribution Theory, created by Fritz Heider, explains how individuals interpret events or instances and how it relates to their behavior. It focuses on how people try and determine what and why they do what they do (Attribution Theory. 2017). In a study researching the importance of different rules within social relationships. Results showed that the rule: 'should look another person in the eye during conversation', was rated less important to people of the Japanese culture. In the same research, it's been observed that Japanese (Eastern) managers make less eye contact than Canadian (Western) managers (Itakura, 2008, Lee, McCarthy, Muir 2008). Looking at the university results, analyzing the question, 'do you view eye contact in your culture as respectful or disrespectful' (Q14), results showed that Asian cultures view eye contact as respectful at 62% with no percentage as disrespectful. Comparing these results to Caucasian, 96% as respectful, and African Americans at 71% respectful and 15% as disrespectful.

## CONCLUSION

Given our results, we found that culture and age play the biggest role in the amount of eye contact that will be shared with strangers. We also saw that most people are generally friendly and will acknowledge a stranger with a smile or a wave of some sort. It was interesting to us that most people felt at least somewhat comfortable while talking to strangers. Prior to the research we conducted, we thought that people would feel uncomfortable, or even very uncomfortable when conversing with strangers.

### *Limitations*

A major limitation in conducting surveys about behavior is that researchers have to depend on respondents' self-reporting, as most are not aware of their behavior or may word their ideas in a way that does not make sense to the researchers. Researchers who use self-report questionnaires are relying on the honesty of their participants. The introspective ability of the respondents, even if a participant is attempting to be honest, may lack the introspective ability to provide an accurate response to a question.

With the years going forward, perceptions of eye contact could of easily changed within the new age gap, Generation X, baby boomers, and Generation Y and Z. Locating significant studies that current and would be more applicable to our studies generation was difficult even though eye contact as a nonverbal is used in every interaction and is an relevant part of how society operates.

Understanding is a key limitation, as participants may also vary regarding their understanding or interpretation of particular questions. Control of sample, as it is an online survey, with tools like SurveyMonkey, the researcher need never meet any of their participants. While this allows much bigger samples to be collected much more quickly, it does cause several concerns over the sample make up. These include participants not being able to ask those giving

the survey clarifying questions, they may also end up with a sample which is vastly skewed towards a certain type of person, as only certain types of people are likely to fill in such questionnaires. Participants given a paper copy of the survey saw limitations as well, there were miscommunications on whether or not some questions were select all that apply versus one answer that best fits. While participants surveyed electronically could only select one answer, the paper copies did not limit the number of answers.

#### *Suggestions for Future Research*

The results of the survey have provided a building block for more extensive research. From this research, it would be worth exploring whether the self-reporting of the demographic is true to their actual behavior. This could be studied through observation, whether it be participant as observer or complete observer.

While the researchers were able to identify trends in correlation with eye contact and gender, culture, and age, these may be offset by results from invalid self-reporting. Future research can explore the significance of setting when it comes to eye contact with a stranger. What are the differences between private faith based institution, such as our study, compared to a public state institution. With future research, the study could also expand on more in depth questions for our study and look at the significance between the age generational gap, if the age difference is a bigger factor than realized. Also exploring the cultural gap, cross-generationally between a first generation Asian American immigrant to its second generation Asian American counterparts.

The results show that this study could have a more sociological approach, having more studies and experiments being conducted on how other social factors influence eye contact. Specifically, if research could have a more in-depth discussion towards gender specific related interactions between strangers.

Based off of the results, researchers were able to identify trends in correlation with eye contact and culture, but specifically looking at Eastern Asian cultures and comparing eye contact to Face-Negotiation Theory, looking at their culture in a more collectivistic group as opposed to Western Asian American cultures and looking at the same theories.

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## Appendix A

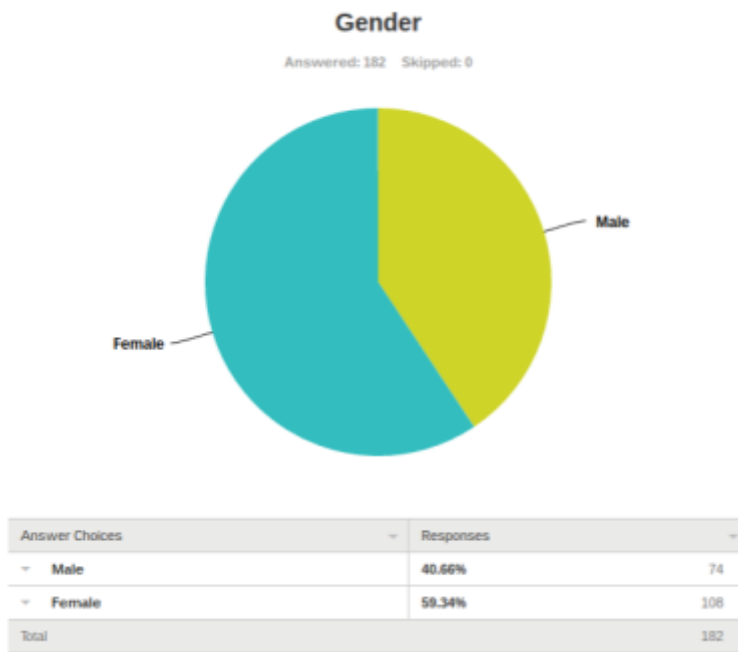


Fig.1

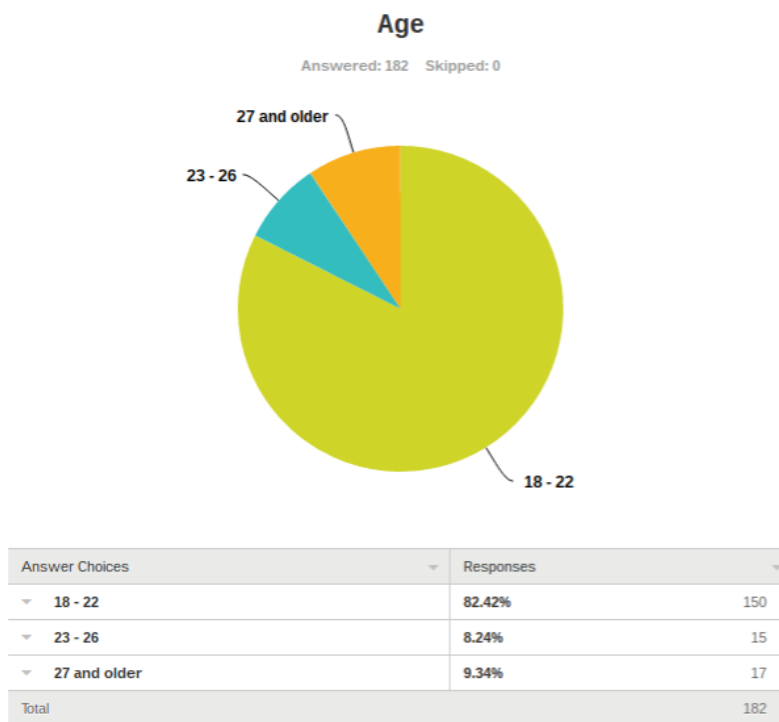


Fig. 2

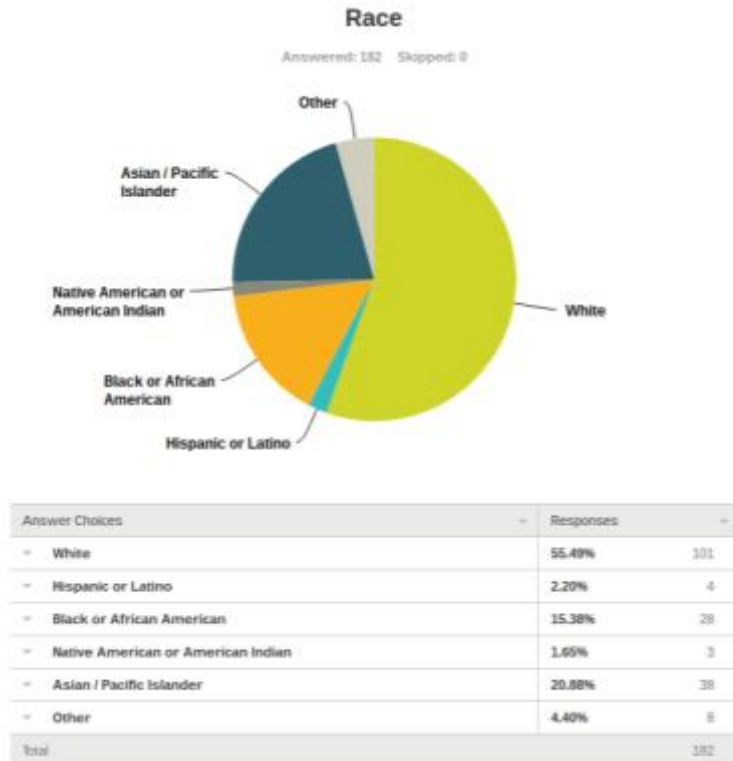


Fig. 3

Appendix B

### Q12 When walking past someone on the street do you:

Answered: 182 Skipped: 0

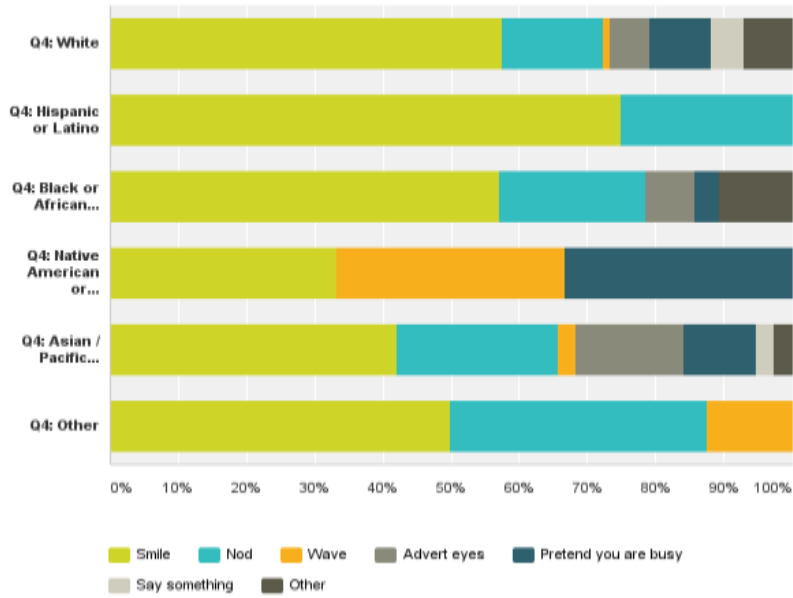


Fig. 4

### Q12 When walking past someone on the street do you:

Answered: 182 Skipped: 0

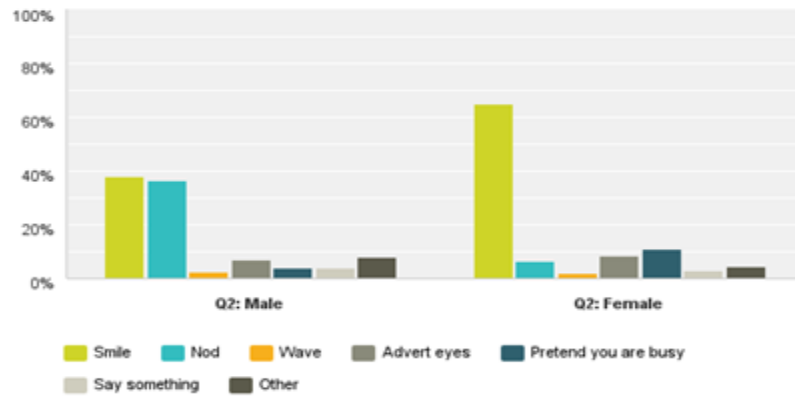


Fig. 5

## Q6 How do you feel when interacting with people?

Answered: 182 Skipped: 0

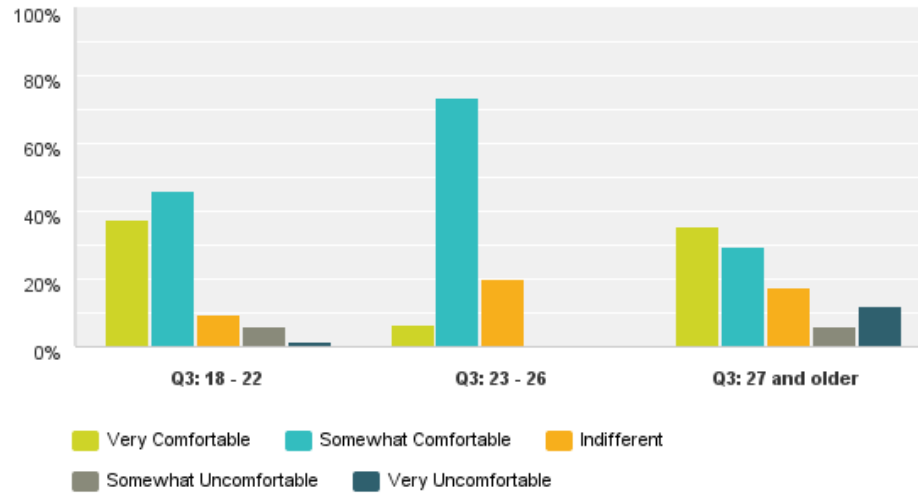


Fig. 6