Imitation: The most successful form of flattery

Imitation, or mimicking others, may be among the easiest and most powerful ways to get someone to like you. What’s more, it can even be used to *bend people to your will!* But, let’s talk about the basic social functions of mimicry first, before we get its more devious applications.

Humans are born mimickers. Studies show that even one-month old babies tend to mimic the facial expression of anyone they’re looking at. One particularly cute example of this was a study (Meltzoff & Moore, 1977) that had young infants look at faces of others who had their mouth open, pinched shut, or tongue sticking out. They found that babies copied these basic facial expressions about 50% of the time. As children get a little older, they quickly begin to mimic complex facial expressions, such as joy, anger, and sadness (Termine & Izard, 1988).
Of course, we’re not the only animals that do this. Most social animals (e.g., monkeys/apes, dogs, sheep) automatically mimic those around them. That’s how a pack/herd mentality can act on large groups of animals to help them hunt, flee from predators, or migrate in group-formation (e.g., the V-shape of a flock of birds). Studies of the brain show that there are areas directly connected to our motor cortex that pay attention to, and mimic, other animals’ behavior. So, when we see someone lift his or her arm to wave hello, a part of our brain activates in the same way as it would if we were raising our own arm in the same way. These areas of our brain are known as mirror neurons and they’ve been directly linked with our innate and automatic tendency to mimic others.

Even as adults, we tend to mimic those around us, often without realizing it. In one of the first studies to show this, Chartrand and Bargh (1999) had participants sit and talk with a confederate (who they thought was just another participant) in a “getting to know you” exercise. Unbeknownst to participants, these confederates had been previously instructed to either continuously shake their foot or touch their face throughout the conversation. Video footage of the interaction revealed that participants in the “foot shaking” condition were far more likely to shake their own foot during the interaction, while those in the “face touching” condition were far more likely to touch their own face during the interaction. During post-experimental interviews, the vast majority of participants didn’t remember the confederate shaking their foot or touching their face and none believed that they had copied this behavior.

In a follow-up experiment, Chartrand and Bargh had participants interact with confederates in a similar way, but this time instructing the confederates to either mimic participants’ posture and gestures or to not imitate participants at all. Post-experimental surveys showed that when participants were mimicked, they ended up liking the
confederate far more and felt that the interaction had gone more smoothly, compared to those who hadn’t been imitated. So, not only do most people automatically imitate others, but this mimicking behavior likely plays a social role in signaling to others that we like and respect them. In fact, mimicry has been shown to be one of the most powerful mechanisms behind interpersonal liking, with mimicry usually accounting for about 40% of the variability in whether two people like, appreciate, and trust each other (Bernieri, 1988; Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; LaFrance, 1979; Pentland, 2010). For example, many studies have found that people who receive the highest evaluations as therapists and teachers are those who automatically mimic their clients and students (Bernieri, 1988; Charney, 1966; LaFrance & Broadbent, 1976; Maurer & Tindall, 1983; Schefflen, 1964). Experiments have also shown that simply imitating participants tends to make them more willing to be helpful (e.g., when asked clean up a room, take long surveys, etc.; van Baaren et al., 2004; Fischer-Lokou et al., 2011; Guéguen et al., 2011), divulge more personal and embarrassing information (Guéguen, 2012), and even give their own money to the person who is mimicking them (Maddux et al., 2008; Stel et al., 2008; Swaab et al., 2011; van Baaren et al., 2004), all because of increased liking and empathy toward the mimicker (Stel et al., 2008).

The effects of mimicry are especially powerful (and profitable) if employed by salespeople. In one study (Jacob et al., 2011), experimenters went to several retail stores and randomly assigned some of the salesclerks to mimic the vocal patterns and bodily movements of store patrons. When clerks mimicked customers, they spent longer in the store, bought more items, and gave the clerk more positive ratings in post-shopping surveys. They even rated the store itself more positively. What’s more, customers were far more likely to buy exactly what the salesclerk had suggested to them, allowing clerks to sell more expensive items to customers. Amazingly, simply imitating customers caused a 73% increase in sales and a 74% increase in the likelihood that customers bought items clerks had suggested for them. A study of bartenders in Holland (van Baaren et al., 2003) found similar results, with bartenders receiving 50% more tips and 46% larger tips when they mimicked customers.
Studies show that mimicry can be used as a two-way mechanism to increase sales. Not only does imitating customers get people to buy more, but simply providing role models who buy products can get others to buy those same products as well. One example of this can be found in a study that took place on German railway cars (Herrmann et al., 2011). Within these train cars, experimenters placed concession stands where passengers could purchase pretzels. During randomly selected railway trips, a confederate would buy a pretzel from the vendor right at the beginning of a trip. Simply having one person on the train model “pretzel buying behavior” caused concession sales on these trips to double. In other words, simply seeing someone buy a pretzel at the beginning of a trip caused other people to be more likely to buy pretzels themselves. In post-experimental interviews, virtually no one said that they had bought a pretzel simply because they saw someone else do it first. In fact, most of the participants didn’t even remember the confederate buying a pretzel at all.

This technique has already become a popular marketing tool, with many companies now paying actors to model consumer behavior in stores and on the streets in order to get potential customers to unthinkingly mimic them. This tactic has been referred to as “stealth” or “undercover” marketing (CBC News, 2011; Dillon, 2004; Goodman, 2006; Lueng, 2003; Osterhout, 2010; Martin & Smith, 2008). For example, companies commonly pay actors to walk the streets of cities, like New York, LA, and Chicago, sporting designer clothing and high-end electronics. The latest version of this scheme is to pay one actor to use a product and another actor to conspicuously ask them about it. These staged duos pretend to be strangers who just happen to notice each other’s clothing, electronics, or other accessories and loudly exclaim things like, “That’s a fabulous dress! Where did you get it?” or, “I’ve heard a lot of good things about that phone. Is it true that it has LTE capability and can be purchased for the low, low price of only $150 with a two-year contract?” For example, one covert marketing campaign by BlackBerry sent attractive women around New York to ask people on the street to take pictures of them using the latest BlackBerry phone. Of course, they would then spend as much time as
they could talking up the product to these kind passersby while they were taking their image.

Covert marketing has also become commonplace in online advertising. Instead of simply placing an ad alongside a blog article or right before a YouTube video, advertisers are paying people to say favorable things about their products in the blog or video itself, usually without any clear sign of it being a paid advertisement. Microsoft recently got into deep water with videogamers when it was uncovered, in a leaked memo, that they were paying Machinima, the extremely popular producer of online content about videogames, to post videos extolling the virtues of the Xbox One (Gibbs, 2014; Their, 2014). These videos featured what appeared to be regular players talking about how much they loved the Microsoft gaming console. Microsoft even paid people to post positive comments about the Xbox One below the videos. Microsoft’s deal with Machinima was quickly dissolved after the memo had leaked and Machinima apologized to its fans, but it’s likely that many of these deals are currently ongoing outside of public knowledge.

Many “news” and social networking companies, such as Buzzfeed and Facebook, openly acknowledge that their services make money through undercover marketing. Buzzfeed continually posts what it calls “sponsored content,” in which products are prominently featured within such “entertaining” posts as, “Nothing Is More Amazing Than This Newborn Lamb Meeting A Cat” and “14 Places You Have To Poop At Before You Die” (editorial note: I did not make these up. Seriously.). These posts are created by marketing companies to expose people to their products, such as a video of a cat jumping in and out of a Doritos bag (again, I did not make this up). Buzzfeed is now among the top 10 “news” sites on the internet and, in 2013, raked in over $120 million through these types of covert advertisements (Hagey, 2012; Saba, 2014).

Marketers know that savvy consumers are now knowledgeable of the subtle and manipulative power of advertisements. People are increasingly dismissive of “customer survey reports” (e.g., “4 out of 5 dentists agree that...”) and balk at obvious product placements in movies. So advertisers have had to re-invent the wheel many times to discover new ways to slip in marketing messages just outside of our awareness. In so
doing, they may have recently stumbled upon a sales tool (i.e., covert marketing) that takes full advantage of an evolved and highly automatized human behavior system (i.e., mimicry) that is extremely difficult to spot and perhaps even more difficult to resist. Studies show that even when participants are directly told that they are being mimicked or told to mimic another person, the power of social imitation is just as strong in getting us to like others, help them, and purchase products from them (Stel et al., 2008). The effects of mimicry are built directly into our brain, so it will likely always be one of the easiest ways to infiltrate our hearts.
References


