

When Observing Gaze Shifts of Others Enhances Object Desirability

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The present research explored when observing gaze shifts of another person, involving both the observer and a specific object, enhances desirability of the gazed-at object. Specifically, we offer an initial attempt to test the idea that a three-step sequence consisting of direct gaze at the observer, followed by object-directed gaze and then by direct gaze at the observer, cues the desirability of an object to the observer and hence increases the perceived desirability of the gazed-at object. We examined this hypothesis in three experiments by manipulating eye-gaze shifts and including a no-gaze control condition. In line with our prediction, results showed that the dynamic sequence of gaze shifts indeed increases perceived object desirability. These findings provide new evidence that a sequence of gaze behavior involving the observer and an object plays an important role in influencing affective evaluation of objects.

Keywords: eye movements, attitudes, nonverbal communication, evaluation, attention

Human preferences are influenced by others communicating the current value of objects in the environment. A subtle way to communicate such information is by means of shifts in eye gaze direction. Gaze direction reveals a person's attentional state and a person's intentions toward objects in the environment (Woodward, 2003). The importance of noticing gaze shifts of others is illustrated by the fact that gaze shifts spontaneously trigger corresponding gaze shifts in observers (e.g., Friesen & Kingstone, 1998; Hood, Willen, & Driver, 1998). Moreover, cueing of objects through gaze shifts enhances information processing of these objects in observers (e.g., Reid & Striano, 2005; Reid, Striano, Kaufman, & Johnson, 2004). This enhanced processing suggests that gaze shifts affect observers' evaluation of objects. Indeed, gaze direction signals which objects are of current value (Becchio, Bertone, & Castiello, 2008). The "language of the eyes" is rather complex (Frischen, Bayliss, & Tipper, 2007), however, and little research has examined how other people's gaze shifts affect object preferences in observers. We examined this issue by exploring sequential aspects of gaze shifts in modulating object desirability.

To date, only few experiments have examined how observing gaze behavior of others influences object desirability (Bayliss, Frischen, Fenske, & Tipper, 2007; Bayliss, Paul, Cannon, & Tipper, 2006; Strick, Holland, & van Knippenberg, 2008), and only one experiment (Bayliss et al., 2006) examined this influence in the absence of other factors such as relative attractiveness (Strick et al., 2008) or emotional expressions (Bayliss et al., 2007) of the faces that displayed the gaze behavior. In this experiment (Bayliss et al., 2006, Experiment 1), participants perceived faces that shifted gaze toward or away from objects. Results showed that

objects were liked less when gaze was shifted away from the objects than when gaze was shifted toward the objects. It is important to note that, as Bayliss et al. noted, it is unclear from their experiment whether observing someone gazing at objects increases object desirability or whether observing someone gazing away from them decreases object desirability. As object desirability may be affected in different directions by different gaze shifts, and perhaps even by the mere presence of a face, a no-gaze control condition is required to examine when observing gaze shifts by others influences object desirability.

Accordingly, the present research offers an initial attempt to investigate how different gaze shifts affect object desirability. Consistent with earlier reasoning (Bayliss et al., 2006; Becchio et al., 2008), we propose that observing another person's gaze shifts toward and away from objects can cue object desirability. Furthermore, we argue that gaze direction is only part of the story. That is, "an equally important component of the cueing process concerns the pattern or history of gaze shifts among objects in the environment" (Mason, Takow, & Macrae, 2005, p. 237). Specifically, we argue that object desirability is enhanced through observing a specific sequence of gaze shifts that signals to an observer that an object is desirable.

This sequence starts with revealing an intention to communicate with an observer. This can be achieved by several means. With respect to the communication function of eyes, one way of effectively doing this is by direct gaze from a communicator toward an observer (Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne, & Moll, 2005). Next, shifting gaze away from an observer toward an object (e.g., a bottle of water) cues that this object is of value (Becchio et al., 2008). As attention naturally settles on desirable objects in the environment (Shimojo, Simion, Shimojo, & Schreier, 2003), an observer can infer from this gaze shift that the object is desirable for the communicator (Bayliss et al., 2006). It is important to note that, as gazing back to an observer after attending to an object signals that the object is also of value for the observer (Striano, & Stahl, 2005; see also Tomasello et al., 2005), we expect that shifting gaze back to the observer leads to the inference that the object is desirable for

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the observer (Aarts, Gollwitzer, & Hassin, 2004), thereby enhancing object desirability. In summary, we hypothesize that observing a specific three-step sequence of gaze shifts, consisting of direct gaze at an observer followed by object-directed gaze and then by direct gaze, informs an observer that the attended object is desirable and hence increases object desirability in the observer.

To test this hypothesis, we presented participants (i.e., the observers) with a face on a computer screen (i.e., the communicator) that displayed the aforementioned three-step sequence of gaze shifts toward a specific object (experimental condition), and we presented other objects that were not subjected to this three-step sequence of gaze shifts (e.g., by including a no-gaze control condition in which no face was presented). Afterward, we measured desirability of all objects. We expected that any enhanced object desirability persists even when the face is no longer present (Becchio et al., 2008) and hence would be evident in a subsequent object evaluation task.

To clarify the findings of earlier research in which a baseline was absent, we first conducted a pilot study in which we examined the effect of direct gaze, followed by gazing at an object (i.e., without looking back to the observer), on object desirability, compared with a no-gaze control condition. In this pilot study, the same face first displayed direct gaze for 1,500 ms and then gazed at an object for 3,000 ms. Another object was displayed without a concurrently presented face (no-gaze control condition). Next, a circle or a cross was briefly presented, and participants indicated whether they saw a circle or cross. This overt monitoring task was used to ensure that participants, at the start of each trial, perceived the initial gaze direction of the eyes. After repeatedly presenting these trials, we measured object desirability (for more details, see Experiment 1's Method section). Results showed that desirability of the object that had been treated with direct gaze followed by gazing at the object (i.e., without looking back to the observer) was not enhanced.¹ This finding is consistent with research (Strick et al., 2008) that showed that static gaze toward an object does not necessarily increase object desirability, suggesting that shifted and static gaze toward objects have similar effects.

On the basis of these pilot data, we first tested whether the three-step sequence (direct gaze at an observer, followed by object-directed gaze, followed by direct gaze at an observer) would enhance object desirability, compared with both a no-gaze condition and a direct-gaze control condition (Experiment 1). Next, we tested whether object desirability is only enhanced when the sequence starts with attracting the observer's attention (i.e., through direct gaze) and not when a face merely shifts gaze from object to observer (Experiment 2). Finally, we compared the three-step sequence toward the object with a three-step sequence away from the object (Experiment 3).

Experiment 1

Method

Participants and design. Forty-four undergraduates (25 women, 19 men) participated in return for course credit or a small fee. The experiment had a three-condition (no-gaze control, direct-gaze control, or experimental) within-participant design.

Procedure and stimulus materials. Participants read that they would participate in research on stimulus detection while

being exposed to other stimuli they regularly encounter in daily life. Specifically, participants were informed that they would see a bottle of water on the computer screen, presented either with or without a (female) face, and that this face sometimes shifted her gaze to appear more realistic. Immediately after each presentation of a bottle and/or a face, a circle or a cross was presented randomly for 20 ms at the location of the eyes; the same (empty) screen location was used in the no-gaze control condition. Participants pressed designated keys to indicate whether they saw a circle or cross. This procedure ensured that participants perceived the position of the eyes at the beginning of each trial without having been explicitly instructed to attend to (Strick et al., 2008) or to ignore (Bayliss et al., 2006) the eyes, and hence without having been sensitized to the purpose of our experiments. Perceiving the initial gaze direction of the face is important for the experimental condition, as we predict that initial direct gaze is a prerequisite for enhanced object desirability to occur (see Experiment 2 for a direct test). Moreover, the overt monitoring task further ensured that the location of the focus of attention at the start of each trial was comparable across conditions. In all three experiments, stimulus detection accuracy was approximately 94% and did not differ across conditions.

The female stimulus face conveyed a neutral expression (see Braun, Gründl, Marberger, & Scherber, 2001) and was presented on the right side of the computer screen. The stimulus products were three bottles of water of different brands, which were pre-tested to be unknown to our participants. A bottle was presented on the left side of the screen, alongside the face. In the no-gaze control condition, only the product was presented for 4,500 ms. In the direct-gaze control condition, both product and face were presented for 4,500 ms. For the experimental condition, an animation was created by shifting the irises in the image of the face. In this experimental condition, the product was visible for 4,500 ms and the face was displayed with direct gaze for the first 1,500 ms, followed by object-directed gaze for 1,500 ms and then direct-gaze again for the remaining 1,500 ms. Across conditions, product exposure time was held constant. Combinations of conditions and products were fixed throughout the experiment and were counter-balanced across participants. The task consisted of 10 trials per condition (i.e., a total of 30 trials).

Next, participants indicated object desirability by answering the following two questions: "How appealing is Brand 'X' to you?" (on a scale ranging from *not at all appealing* [1] to *very appealing* [9]) and "If Brand 'X' would be introduced on the market, would you buy it?" (on a scale ranging from *no, definitely not* [1] to *yes, definitely* [9]). Mean Cronbach's alpha of these questions across experiments and conditions was 0.70. Debriefing showed that none of the participants realized the true nature of the experiments.

¹ This finding might seem surprising considering the results of Bayliss et al. (2006; Experiment 1). However, as they did not include a no-gaze control condition, and because of other methodological differences, direct comparisons are difficult to interpret.

Results and Discussion

Object desirability ratings were averaged for each participant and subjected to the within-participants analysis of variance (ANOVA). This analysis yielded a reliable effect, $F(2, 42) = 3.70$, $p < .04$, $\eta^2 = .07$ (see Table 1).² Simple main effects showed that desirability ratings were higher in the experimental condition compared with the no-gaze control condition, $F(1, 43) = 6.85$, $p < .02$, $\eta^2 = .16$; and the direct-gaze control condition, $F(1, 43) = 3.25$, $p < .08$, $\eta^2 = .08$. Object desirability did not differ between the control conditions, $F < 1$.

As expected, shifting gaze from an observer toward a specific object and back toward the observer increased object desirability. Moreover, observing a face displaying direct gaze next to an object did not affect object desirability, suggesting that some reference to the object is required to enhance object desirability. However, we expect that not just any reference to the object will do. In Experiment 2, we tested our prediction that, to enhance object desirability, the sequence of gaze shifts should start with direct gaze. Therefore, in Experiment 2, we included a condition in which gaze was merely shifted from a specific object to the observer, and we expected no enhanced desirability ratings in this condition.

Experiment 2

Method

Participants and design. Fifty-one undergraduates (25 women, 26 men) completed this experiment in return for course credit or a small payment. The experiment had a three-condition (no-gaze control, gazing from object to observer, or experimental) within-participants design.

Procedure and stimulus materials. Compared with Experiment 1, the direct-gaze condition was replaced by a “gazing from object to observer” condition, in which the stimulus face first gazed at an object (3,000 ms) and then shifted gaze toward the observer (1,500 ms). In this gazing from object to observer condition, the product was visible during the entire sequence (i.e., 4,500 ms).

Results and Discussion

A within-participants ANOVA with averaged desirability ratings as the dependent variable yielded a reliable effect, $F(2, 49) = 3.48$, $p < .04$, $\eta^2 = .08$ (see Table 1). Simple main effects showed that object desirability was higher in the experimental condition than in the gazing from object to observer condition, $F(1, 50) = 4.69$, $p < .04$, $\eta^2 = .09$; and the no-gaze control condition, $F(1, 50) = 6.30$, $p < .02$, $\eta^2 = .13$. Object desirability did not differ between the gazing from object to observer condition and the no-gaze control condition, $F < 1$. Consistent with Experiment 1, results showed that the three-step sequence of direct gaze followed by object-directed gaze and then by direct gaze increased object desirability. Important to note, and consistent with our prediction, merely gazing from the object to the observer did not increase object desirability, suggesting that an initial cue that reveals an intention to communicate (such as direct gaze) is crucial in increasing desirability of attended objects.³

In Experiment 3, we return to the question raised in the introduction of whether observing gaze shifts away from an object may lead to decreased object desirability (i.e., as in avoiding the object; Bayliss et al., 2006). On the basis of the role of eye gaze in directing attention to objects (e.g., Becchio et al., 2008), we hypothesized that gaze shifts toward objects are more informative than gaze shifts away from objects. Although there are usually many stimuli present in the environment, gaze can only be directed at one object within a specific time frame. In principle then, gaze shifts toward an object can be a clear signal that this object is valuable, whereas gaze shifts away from an object provide less clear information to an observer.

To test this idea, we included a condition similar to the experimental condition, but we replaced object-directed gaze by gazing away from the object. We expected no effect of this condition, compared with a no-gaze control condition, on object desirability. Additionally, we included the experimental condition to once more replicate the increased desirability effect.

Experiment 3

Method

Participants and design. Thirty-nine undergraduates (26 women, 13 men) received course credit or a small payment for participation. The experiment had a three-condition (no-gaze control, three-step sequence gazing away from object, or experimental) within-participants design.

Procedure and stimulus materials. The gazing from object to observer condition (see Experiment 2) was replaced by a “three-step sequence, gazing away from object” condition in which first the stimulus face displayed direct gaze (1,500 ms), followed by gazing away from the object (1,500 ms), followed by direct gaze (1,500 ms).

Results and Discussion

The averaged desirability ratings were subjected to the within-participants ANOVA. This analysis yielded a reliable effect, $F(2,$

² Across the three studies, there were no consistent and reliable gender effects on desirability ratings.

³ It should be noted that actual looking times to object and observer between the gazing from object to observer condition (3,000 ms to object; 1,500 ms to observer) and the experimental condition (1,500 ms to object; 3,000 ms to observer) differ. Strictly speaking, differences in looking times thus may explain why object desirability in the no-gaze control condition differed from the experimental condition but not from the gazing from object to observer condition. To examine this, we conducted a new experiment ($N = 39$), but this time the face in the gazing from object to observer condition first gazed at an object for 1,500 ms and then shifted gaze toward the observer for 3,000 ms (similar looking times as in the experimental condition). Results showed a main effect, $F(2, 37) = 3.95$, $p < .03$, $\eta^2 = .18$. Object desirability was higher in the experimental condition ($M = 5.68$, $SD = 2.18$) than in the gazing from object to observer control condition ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.65$), $F(1, 39) = 6.43$, $p < .02$, $\eta^2 = .15$; and the no-gaze control condition ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 2.34$), $F(1, 39) = 5.24$, $p < .03$, $\eta^2 = .12$. Object desirability, however, did not differ between the control conditions, $F < 1$. These results indicate that enhanced desirability did not result from differences in looking times.

Table 1
Means (and Standard Deviations) of Object Desirability for the Different Conditions in Experiments 1–3

Experiment	<i>M (and SD) for condition</i>		
1	No gaze control, 4.80 (1.94)	Direct gaze control, 4.94 (2.19)	Experimental, 5.63 (2.09)
2	No gaze control, 4.24 (2.01)	Gazing from object to observer, 4.48 (2.29)	Experimental, 5.31 (2.25)
3	No gaze control, 3.90 (2.25)	Three-step sequence away from object, 3.92 (1.87)	Experimental, 5.04 (2.10)

37) = 6.38, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .12$ (see Table 1). Simple main effects showed that object desirability was higher in the experimental condition than in the three-step sequence gazing away from object condition, $F(1, 38) = 10.37$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .46$; and the no-gaze control condition, $F(1, 38) = 7.54$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .17$. Object desirability did not differ between the three-step sequence gazing away from object and no-gaze control conditions, $F < 1$.

Results of Experiment 3 again showed that the three-step sequence of gaze shifts toward an object increased object desirability, compared with a no-gaze control condition. Moreover, when a communicator gazes away from an object, desirability of this object is not affected. Hence, gaze shifts toward an object may signal that this object is valuable, whereas gaze shifts away from an object provide little information to an observer. Moreover, no effect of this gazing away condition rules out the possibility that multiple gaze shifts, which may be more visually interesting and attention attracting, suffice to enhance object desirability independent of their direction. As such, our findings suggest that the enhanced desirability ratings caused by the three-step sequence of gaze shifts indeed result from inferences of the observer that the communicator cues that the gazed at object is desirable.

General Discussion

The results of three experiments offer novel evidence that a three-step sequence of direct gaze followed by object-directed gaze and then direct gaze enhances object desirability. Moreover, the present work extends previous research concerning the influence of gaze behavior on object desirability (Bayliss et al., 2006, 2007; Strick et al., 2008) by showing that the mere presence of a face near an object, or any object-directed gaze, do not necessarily increase object desirability. Instead, the present results point to the importance of the pattern of gaze shifts in affecting desirability of objects in the immediate environment (Mason et al., 2005).

It is important to emphasize that, in the present research, enhanced object desirability was observed even under circumstances where participants were engaged in a task during the gaze manipulation that was irrelevant for stimuli evaluation (i.e., detecting circles and crosses) and even when the evaluations were measured after all stimuli had been presented. Hence, the increased object desirability as a result of the three-step sequence of gaze shifts is independent of an explicit evaluative processing mode during stimuli presentation (Pecchinenda, Pes, Ferlazzo, & Zoccolotti, 2008; Veling, Holland, & van Knippenberg, 2007), and it persists even when the face is no longer present (see Becchio et al., 2008). These aspects strongly suggest that object desirability is influenced spontaneously when perceiving other people's gaze shifts involving oneself and an object.

We used a detection task to ensure that participants across the conditions focused their attention on the same location on screen

and perceived the gaze direction of the faces at the start of each trial. In the case of starting with direct gaze, however, such cueing may not be necessary as direct gaze may naturally attract attention of an observer (Bayliss et al., 2006; Kleinke, 1986). Moreover, in daily life, a communicator could gaze at an observer as long as needed to establish eye contact and reveal his or her intention to communicate. So, enhanced object desirability should also occur in the absence of external cues that attract the observer's attention.

The present findings show that gaze shifts affect object desirability when an observer is part of a three-step communicative sequence, instigated by another person and directed at a specific object. However, this is not to say that this sequence is always necessary to communicate object desirability to an observer (e.g., Bayliss et al., 2007; Dik & Aarts, 2007). For instance, as a first step in the sequence, other cues than direct gaze that signal the intention to communicate (e.g., saying "look") may lead to similar effects. Moreover, recent research has shown that emotional expressions displayed by a gazing face can affect object desirability without displaying the three-step sequence we propose here (Bayliss et al., 2007), indicating that emotional expressions also convey information about the desirability of objects. Information about the value of objects in the environment can be communicated in different ways, and our findings point to the importance of a sequence of gaze behavior involving both the observer and an object.

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