

# Can You Understand Language That Is not Spoken - Comparison between Hospitality Students and Employees

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Can You Understand Language That Is not Spoken – Comparison between Hospitality  
Students and Employees

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Senior Project

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RIT Croatia

## ABSTRACT

Verbal communication is a key for mutual understanding and interaction between individuals and groups. But it all started with signs and gestures of our ancestors in a form of nonverbal communication. Today we value more verbal part of our behavior and a lot of people underestimate the importance of nonverbal behavior in everyday life. This paper was focused on nonverbal behavior more specifically on the importance of perception of nonverbal behavior in college students and hotel employees and differences in genders when it comes to nonverbal behavior. The results showed that there are no significant differences in perception of students and hotel employees on nonverbal behavior, but the results from survey did contradict with literature done by other authors on nonverbal behavior when it comes to gender differences.

Key words: Nonverbal communication, nonverbal behavior, body language, hospitality, language.

## INTRODUCTION

The nature of tourism is that it is interpersonal. Its focus is on human interactions and relationships between guests and tourist workers. Because of that, it is crucial to understand the importance of communication and messages between people especially when it comes to tourism and service providers. Communication can be divided into two main parts: verbal communication and nonverbal communication. This paper will be focused on primarily nonverbal communication. Developing nonverbal communication skill is very important especially if a person is working in hospitality more specifically on front desk. It is a crucial skill that can help improve quality of the service and guest's satisfaction. Front desk employees usually have the first and the last contact with a guest and will be the first impression of the hotel. That is why it is important to train your employees about nonverbal behavior so they can recognize the problem and adapt to the situation.

The most important science figure for nonverbal communication is Albert Mehrabian. He is one of the most influenced scientists in this area and has developed his famous communicational model called Mehrabian Model. He is also professor of Psychology on UCLA. He comes to two main conclusions, first one is that there are three elements when it comes to face-to-face communication, and we can divide communication into three segments: words-7%, tone of voice-38% and body language-55%. This is also called the 3V for Verbal, Vocal and Visual. This means that 93% of communication is nonverbal and only 7% is verbal. The second conclusion is that this nonverbal behavior is very important when it comes to feelings and attitudes. For example if there is a mismatch between words and tone of voice or his facial expressions, people are going to take in consideration nonverbal behavior (tone of voice or expressions on your face) over the words, or what you actually said (Albert Mehrabian, Communication Studies). Furthermore, people are attracted to things they like and will avoid things they don't like. That means that if you have positive emotions and behavior

they are more likely to approach you than if you have negative emotions (anger, frustration). According to Albert Mehrabian this only applies when it comes to expressing feelings and emotions, not in other cases of communication.

Nonverbal communication has a significant importance on everything and can be applied in any situation. Huge part of nonverbal communication is body language. Body language includes eye contacts, facial expressions, gestures... But nonverbal communication includes those things and also how people dress, personal space, tattoos they have, jewelry etc. (Hogan K., 2008). It works in a way that person that is an expert in nonverbal behavior will observe what another person is saying and how his facial expressions, signals and gestures match with what words come out from their mouth. If there is a mismatch then that person is probably lying. For example if a person is talking with his finger pointing to one direction and his head is turned to another direction then most probably that person is lying. It is important to look for more clues, because one sign on person's body is not enough to determine his emotional state. Body language is like an alphabet. There are certain positions that have meaning and they represent how that person is feeling. Each position, gesture has its own meaning and it is job of an expert to decode it (Hogan K., 2008).

People underestimate the power of nonverbal communication and its importance in private and business life. That is because there is a lack of understanding for it in minds of general public. It is important to understand and realize that our thoughts and emotions are channeled externally through facial expressions, gestures, body movements and signals (Phipps R., 2012).

In the past scientist believed that human emotions were expressed only through facial expressions, but later through multiple researches and studies they discovered that we interpret emotions through our entire body (Goman C. K., 2008). That being said we should

not ignore facial expressions but according to Wood P. (2012) facial cues is just one of the most important cues when it comes to communication and first impression.

According to Sundaram, D.S. and Webster C. (2000) nonverbal behavior can be separated into four different categories: physical, kinesics, proxemics and paralanguage. Physical is about your physical attributes and appearance. When it comes to service employees it is about dress code and how they look (haircut, perfume...). When it comes to kinesics it is about body movement, gestures, eye contact etc. It is very important and can have an influence on other people's behavior. Proxemics is distance and posture. It also includes touch which is very important in communication, because touch can create emotional connections and can completely change the attitude of another person. Last but not least is paralanguage and that is connected with tone of voice, pitch variations, amplitudes and similar. It is very important part of nonverbal communication that is often ignored or put aside (Sundaram, D.S. & Webster C, 2000). In this paper focus will be on all of these aspects of nonverbal behavior except physical.

Employee's nonverbal behavior has an impact on the guest, which means that customers' satisfaction depends on the nonverbal behavior of the other side, in this case a tourist worker/employee. For example if a guest approaches the front desk receptionist in the hotel, and receptionist had some conflict with his co-worker and he/she shows it with his face expressions the guest will feel threatened or uncomfortable and the guest will respond negatively.

According to Hickons III, M.L. and Stacks, D.W. (1993) nonverbal communication is a process whereby people, through the intentional or unintentional behavior of normative actions and expectations, other than words themselves, express experiences, feelings and attitudes in order to relate to and control themselves, others and their environment. As

previously said nonverbal behavior has an impact on the emotional response of guests. To understand this better, first the emotional contagion needs to be explained. It is when a person, consciously or unconsciously is influencing someone else using his/her emotions and behavior (Barsade S.G., 2002). Another definition explains emotional contagion as “the tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize expressions, vocalizations, postures and movements with those of another person’s, and consequently, to converge emotionally” (Hatfield E., Cacioppo J.T. and Rapson R.L., 1993).

Gestures are another interesting nonverbal segment of nonverbal communication. According to Hartley G. & Karinch M. (2007) gestures can be divided into several categories: symbols, illustrators, regulators, adaptors, and barriers. They also include rituals as it can be part of daily routine and mirroring. Humans are very intelligent species, but we are limited in terms of brain patterns. We can only think to the extent that brain allows us, which is why every secret code made by humans can be deciphered by another human. We can understand apes gestures and they can understand ours. Most of gestures are universal of course someone can for example starch their neck more than others or cross their arms just because they feel comfortable doing it, but in general gestures are universal. For example the famous Nazi salute was actually used by USA citizens as a Pledge of Allegiance from 1892. Later in 1942 they change it after Nazis started to use it. They took it all the way back from Roman Empire (Hartley G. & Karinch M., 2010). This just shows that humans adapt their gestures and behavior and that the same gesture was used in different cultures, but with a different meaning. According to Charles Darwin emotions and behavior are closely connected and we behave the way that emotions are guiding us and emotions are doing what is beneficial for the organism (de Gelder B., 2006).

Now when there is a better understanding of nonverbal behavior and emotions we can discuss the importance of relationship between these two variables. According to an experiment done

by Dimber U., Thenberg M. and Elmehed K. (2000) positive and negative emotions can occur when exposed to some facial expressions. It is important to mention that mimicking was also noticed in these interactions between guests and employees with some basic emotions such as: sadness, happiness, anger etc. (Hess U. and Blairy S., 2001). According to Barger P. and Grandey A. A., (2006) the guests emotional response is changing comparatively with employees' facial expressions. There is definitely a linkage between nonverbal communication and emotional response and it is very complex, but there are also some studies that indicate that nonverbal communication is directly influencing satisfaction of guests.

According to Burgoon et al., (2011) Nonverbal behavior is organized into typology of codes. Codes are the systematic means, through which meanings are created (encoded), transmitted, perceived and interpreted. There are three groups in which we can sort out codes and they are: body, sensory/contact, and spatiotemporal codes. Nonverbal behavior is of crucial importance for understanding the relationships inside organizations; also it is a key factor in communication that has a big influence on human response and behavior (Bonaccio S., et al., 2016).

The main research question for this project on nonverbal communication is: Perception of the importance of nonverbal communication between students and hospitality employees. The author will conduct the research on Dubrovnik area. Since tourism is all about relationships and communications between guests and employees, this topic is very interesting and important to research. The findings of this research will be beneficial to primarily employees, but also managers and guests. Managers will understand the importance of nonverbal communication and quality of service will improve which will lead to improvement of guest satisfaction. There will be also two hypotheses that need to be researched. First one will be about differences between male and female elements of nonverbal behavior. These will shows are there any differences between them and if there are what they are. There have already



been conducted a lot of research on this topic and we know that there are differences in nonverbal communication and behavior of male and female, but this research will focus on employees of tourist sector and students at the college. There are a lot of differences between two genders when it comes to body language for example if a man crosses his legs he is in submissive or defensive attitude, on the other hand if woman crosses her legs she feels comfort (Eggert M. A., 2012). According to Brody and Hall (1993) people expect from women to have more concern and interpersonal sensitivity than men. Also according to study McClure (2000) females are better in reading body language and facial expressions than males. When it comes to males population research done by Burleson (2003) concluded that men tend to value communication skill such as persuasion much more than women and they use it more frequently. There is a gender differences in communication styles where man based on emotional information create a message and persuade others, females are using this emotional information to provide support and comfort (Atwater, 2004; Eagly and Karau, 2002).

Second hypothesis is to try and find if there is any gap between how employees use their nonverbal communication when talking with guests and what they actually think.

Collection data or methodology will consist of two parts. First one is about questionnaire to see what employees think, how they should behave when talking with guests. Second part is about observation, to see if there is match or mismatch between what they say and how they behave in real life situations. I will take about 20 employees from front desk and the rest 80 participants will be the RIT Croatia students from Dubrovnik Campus.

## METHOD

The author chose to deploy two distinct methods of social research: survey and observation; survey as a quantitative source of information and observation as a qualitative source for obtaining the better perception. There were two groups of people that were questioned. The first was students from RIT Dubrovnik Campus, eighty of them and then there were twenty employees of front desk in five star hotels in the city of Dubrovnik. This survey consisted of 16 questions divided into three parts. First were demographic questions about their age, gender and level of education. Then there were sets of several questions with a scale from one to five, where one was “not important” and five was “extremely important”. The purpose of these set of questions were to determine how important certain nonverbal segments of communication to responders are.

The last part of survey was questions with possible answers A, B or C. The theme of these questions was differences in male and female nonverbal behavior. The role was to compare answers from respondents with actual data that has already been studied and see if there is a gap between what scientists says and what respondents actually answered. For example the question was how do you want people to approach you? The answers were from the side, from the back or from the front. According to Edwards V. V. (2017) female participants prefer to be approached from the front where male participants prefer to be approached from the side, because in male perception coming from the front may be the sign of aggression. It is similar as in wild life when you have two animals which usually start their fight coming from the front one on another, that concept is transferred to human behavior. Similar situation is with another question; if someone nods he/she is? Answers for that question were: trying to show agreement and trying to show he/she is listening and want speaker to continue. These questions were made to see differences between male and female responses and if there is an actual gap between what they choose and what science according to Edwards V. V. (2017) is

saying. Male population tend to nod because they are showing agreement while female population is nodding to show speaker to continue and as a confirmation that they listen to them (Edwards V. V., 2017).

The second part of methodology was to observe twenty front desk employees. The observation was based on the survey that respondents took. Answers from the survey were compared with actual behavior of employees during their interactions with guests. Each employee would get a paper with certain mark to distinguish one respondent from another. The mark was written on the bottom of the last page of the paper in the form like:

“Respondent A”, “Respondent B” etc. Observer was sitting in a lobby near reception with a purpose to observe behavior of the employees. The observer had notes with questions from the actual survey and for each question a “yes” and “no” answer that would observe mark depending how employee behaved.

Students’ group of participants was chosen randomly. These were sophomores, juniors and seniors. The survey would be distributed in the classroom in form of pen and paper with short and clear instructions at the beginning. There were in total seven invalid answers.

The main obstacle for this project was a small sample of participants. Since the survey was done on 100 participants and observation only on 20 participants. These 80 students were just as a sample for standard to compare with the 20 employees participants, because it is very complex and time consuming to observe all 100 participants.

## RESULTS

There were two different samples. First one was students and second employees of hotels. Demographist for students consisted of three questions: age, level of education and gender. Student sample consisted of 62.5% female and 37.5 male participants. Level of finished education was high school because these were all students of sophomore, junior and senior year. The average year of student participants was 22.

There were total 80 participants out of which 50 female and 30 male. The purpose of next set of questions is to determine the importance of nonverbal communications from students perspective and to see if there is any differences between male and female perception of nonverbal communication. These were Likert Scale questions from one to five, where one is not important and 5 is extremely important. In the rest of this result section scale 5 and 4, extremely important and important will be referred as “important” to simplify the procedure of results section in this paper. On the question of importance of verbal communication 98% of female participant answered that it is important and only 2 % were neutral. When it comes to male population they result was similar with almost 97% said it is important and only 3 % was neutral. On the question of importance of nonverbal communication in female sample 90% agreed it is important and 10% was neutral or somehow important. On the other hand male participants answered with 70% of them agreed that it is important and 30% were neutral. Next set of questions were also Likert Scale, but with more specific examples of nonverbal behavior. On question, how important is for you to lean forward when person speaks to you, 56% of female participants said that it is important and 44% of the were neutral or that it is not that important. On the other hand when it comes to male participants only 17% of them said that it is important, 73% were neutral, 3% said it is somehow important and 7% said it is not important at all. Next question was: Nod while listening to a person, where 80% of female participants said it is important and 20% was neutral or said it is somehow

important. Where 67% of male participants said it is important and 33 were neutral or somehow important. When it comes to eye contact 93% of female participants said that it is important and only 6% were neutral. Similar results with male participant where 97% of them were positive in terms that they think it is important and only 3% neutral. Next question was how important is it for you not to cover mouth while talking to someone. This question had a broad span of answers. Female answer positively with 66%, 16% were neutral, 4 somehow important and 14% were that it is not important at all. Where male participant answered similar with 57% being positive, 27 % neutral, 10% somehow important and 6% said that it is not important at all. The next question was the importance of smiling while talking to someone. This question has some surprising results. Female answered with 74% as important and 20% were neutral, also 6% were somehow or not important at all. Male answered with 47% being positive, but more than half were neutral about this question, more precisely 53%. When it comes to handshake females and males rated this as very important. Females with 78% and males with 90%. The importance of tone and pitch of voice was also similar to handshake where majority of results were positive with females answering 96% that it is important and males with 83%.

Last group of questions were based on differences between males and females. First question was: How do you want people to approach you? When it comes to female population on question how do you want to be approached, there was no much surprise, 2% said from the side, 0% said from the back and 96% said from the front, there were also 2% invalid answers. When it comes to males 7% said from the side, 0% said from the back and 93% said from the front. On question: How do you want a close friend to reach out to you, females answered with 24% touch your arm, 58% hug you, 14% pat your back and also 4% invalid answers. On the other hand males answered with 33% touch your arm, 27% hug you and 40% pat your back. The last question was: If someone nods he/she is? Females answered with 16% trying to

show agreement, 80% trying to show they are listening and want speaker to continue and 4% were invalid. Where males answered with 37% trying to show agreement, 60% they are listening and want speaker to continue and 3% invalid.

When it comes to average and standard deviation it is very positive. The biggest result in average had question regarding importance of eye contact with 4,61 and the lowest was the importance of exposing palms when speaking with 2,85. The biggest standard deviation had question regarding covering your mouth while talking with 1,06.

The second segments of participants were employees in five star hotels that are working on the front desk. This segment was much smaller with 20 participants, nine females and eleven males' employees. They were given the same questionnaire as students and they answered all questions positively both males and females except with two questions. On the question about importance of showing palm while talking females answered with 56% that is important, 22% were neutral and 22% were somehow important. While males answered with 55% important, 18% neutral and 27% somehow important. Another question was about covering mouth while talking and female answered with 67% that it is important not to cover mouth while talking, 22% neutral and 11% somehow important. Male answered 73% that it is important, 18% somehow important and 9% that it is not important at all.

When it comes to last three questions about male and female differences, there are 100% responses on first question: How do you want people to approach you and everyone circled answer, from the front. While males for the same question answered 18% from the side, 0% from the back and 82% from the front. On question how do you want people to reach out to you? Females answered with 44% to touch your arm, 56% hug you and 0% pats your back. Males for the same question had 9% touch your arm, 0% hug you and 91% pat your back. Last but not least question about if someone nods he/she is trying to show agreement 11% and

listening and want speaker to continue 89%. While males for the same question answered 36% for agreement and 64% for listening and wants speaker to continue.

The lowest average was 3,45 regarding the question of exposing palms and the biggest average was 4,75 regarding smiling while talking. This shows that answers were very positive and high graded. The highest standard deviation was 1,36 for question regarding covering mouth while talking, same question as for students.

When it comes to observation the results will be divided into six categories, based on nonverbal behavior and they are: smile, covering their mouth, showing palms, eye contact, nodding and leaning forward. The observation was done on front desk employees on the reception from the lobby during morning on weekends when there are the most guests coming and leaving. When it comes to smiling 19/20 smiled while talking with guests, all 20 participants answered positively on question about smiling. Nobody covered their mouth while talking with guests which was positive thing, but 4 of them had negative comments in survey which means they circled that it was not important or somehow important. Only 4/20 showed or exposed their palms while talking or giving direction, and 5 of them said in survey that it is not that important, 4 were neutral and 11 of them said that it is important. Almost everyone had a good eye contact with guests, in numbers 19/20 and they all answered positively on this question. When it comes to nodding 14/20 nodded. In survey one said that it is not important and two were neutrals. Lastly leaning forward did half of participants 10/20. In survey one was negative comment and two neutrals.

## DISCUSSION

Research question was to determine the perception on nonverbal communication between employees and students. From these results from survey we can see that there is definitely

awareness in terms of nonverbal communication both with students and employees. But when compared with verbal communication there is slightly more importance given to verbal than nonverbal communication. Also student and hotel employees are aware of importance of smiling, eye contact, nodding, leaning forward because these are “universal” gestures of politeness and kindness. When it comes to exposing/showing palms to your audience or person with whom you are talking or covering your mouth the results are a little bit lower than the rest. It is probably because people are not familiar with these types of body language and gestures. It is not “common knowledge”. These types of behavior can be easily explained. Showing your palms is sign of credibility; you are showing that you don’t have anything in your hands which sends message to your audience that that person can be trusted. This gesture has its importance from the beginning of human existence, when you are showing your hands to prove that you don’t have any weapons on you. When someone is talking and suddenly puts his hands away where we can’t see them any more we will start feeling uncomfortable and that is a natural reaction because our brain sends signals that there is a potential danger. When it comes to covering mouth it is a gesture that that person is lying or hiding something. It is a gesture left from our childhood where you can see some children trying to hide their mouth when lying.

First hypothesis was about differences in male and female perception of nonverbal communication. It is interesting to mention that question about smiling while talking to others in male responders has over 53% neutral answers compare to female with 20%. It is surprising not only because there is a difference between genders, but also because the expectations were that most of answers would be positive. When it comes to last three questions about different approach in genders; first of them, how do you want people to approach you? When it comes to female they want to be approached from the front, but when it comes to males according to Edwards V. V. (2017) they want to be approached from the



side, because approaching from the front is act of aggression in male's perception. That being said, results from the questionnaire regarding female population almost all of them picked the answer of being approached from the front. Surprisingly male population, at least majority of them picked also from the front. The question about: how do you want a close friend to reach out to you was as expected. When it comes to female population according to Edwards V. V. (2017) they want to be hugged or touched on the arm while male prefer to pat their backs. Last question about, if someone nods what his body language says? According to Edwards V. V. (2017) males are in most cases trying to show agreement while female trying to show they are listening and wants speaker to continue. Results from questionnaire confirmed the female approach, but again male sample failed to support this statement. Less than female sample, but still most of them picked that they are trying to show that they are listening and wants speaker to continue. This showed that either these statements are incorrect, or maybe the sample was too small. Also this may suggest that people have different perception, they might feel one way, but think that they are actually feeling another way. Since we as human beings project our emotions through nonverbal behavior.

When it comes to the second hypothesis of the perception of employees how they behave and what they think about nonverbal communication, it is important to mention that it was a small sample of 20 participants and the data will be expressed as numerical numbers not as percentage. The interesting results comes from showing palms, where only 4 out of 20 showed or exposed their palms, but 11 out of 20 said that it is important to show palms. The gesture to show palms comes from our ancestries as a way of knowing is a person an enemy or friend. By exposing hands they show that that person doesn't have weapon or any other hidden object. This is something that most people don't know, and still more than half of participants agreed on importance of this gesture, but just few of them transferred this into action. Leaning forward was another interesting segment of body language that had

interesting results. Most of participants, more particularly 17 of them said in survey that leaning forward is important while talking with guests, but only 10 out of 20 actually did it. This might indicate that most of participants are aware of importance of leaning forward, but are not actually practicing it in real life. There is a gap in perception between what they think and how they actually behave. When comparing data from questioners of students and employees there is no any major differences, but there were differences when it comes to male and female perception of nonverbal communication (figure 1 and 2).

According to Robert Phipps (2012) in order to read people's signs there are three crucial steps to do that: observe, decode and adapt. First step is observation and you need to train your eye and notice changes in people's behavior. Once when you understand the message you have a choice what to do with it. Second step is decoding, where you after catching certain gestures or changes on their face need to know what they mean. It is like an alphabet and you need to know what that particular movement or position means. Lastly adapting is very important to be able to change yours perception of the individual in order to understand how they actually feel.

All things considered there is a notion of existence of nonverbal behavior in people's mind, but it is simply not enough. There should be more effort put into educating people not only on universities but also in high schools about the importance and basics of nonverbal behavior. Since that skill is tremendously important for almost any job, relationship or situation. There should be a notion of same importance as verbal and as nonverbal communication.

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## APPENDIX

### “Lie to me or not!”

Please take a couple of minutes for filling out questions. Please write honestly your opinions and thoughts. Thank you for your participation in this survey.

**Tin Vukelić**

Gender:	
Male	Female

Age:

Level of finished Education
High School
College Degree
Master’s Degree
Doctoral Degree

Please circle the number on scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not important and 5 is extremely important, the answers that you think represents most accurately your opinion on the following statements.

	Not important	Somehow important	Neutral	Important	Extremely important
Please circle the importance of verbal communication for you.	1	2	3	4	5

Please circle the importance of nonverbal communication for you.	1	2	3	4	5
--	---	---	---	---	---

<b>How important it is that you:</b>	Not important	Somehow important	Neutral	Important	Extremely important
Lean forward when person approaches you and starts to speak.	1	2	3	4	5
Nod while listening to a person.	1	2	3	4	5
Make an eye contact while talking with someone.	1	2	3	4	5
Show/expose palms while talking to someone.	1	2	3	4	5
Don't cover your mouth while talking to someone.	1	2	3	4	5
Smile while talking.	1	2	3	4	5
Have a strong positive handshake.	1	2	3	4	5
Have good pitch and tone of voice.	1	2	3	4	5

Please circle the answer that most closely represents your opinion.

How do you want people to approach you?
a) From the side
b) From the back
c) From the front

How do you want a close friend to reach out to you?
a) Touch your arm
b) Hug you
c) Pat yours back

If someone nods he/she is:
a) Trying to show agreement
b) Trying to show he/she is listening and wants the speaker to continue

Figure 1.

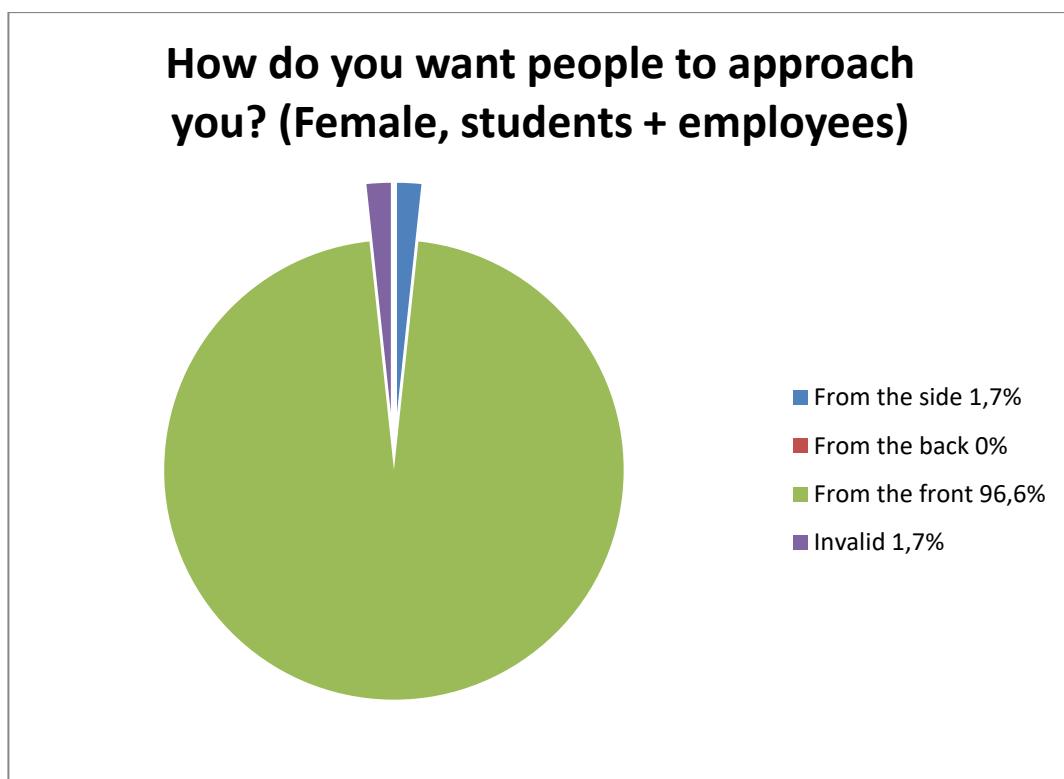


Figure 2.

