

## How Static Postures are Interpreted in Thailand

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### Abstract

*The goal of this research was to determine how Thai citizens interpret various body postures. Non-verbal cues contribute to first impressions, and posture is one of those cues to which participants pay attention to in a conversation. Students from Thailand (n=431) used freely chosen adjectives to describe six postures varying in head position and trunk position. The postures were depicted as silhouettes that were compared on the basis of the adjectives most frequently applied to them. The respondents' perceptions of the static postures portrayed in the silhouettes did not coincide with the meanings traditionally attributed to those postures in Thai culture; they overlapped more with international interpretations than with the traditional Thai interpretations of postural cues. This discrepancy may have been caused by the participants' multicultural backgrounds and the international environment they had been exposed to.*

**Keywords:** body posture; kinesics; non-verbal communication; Thailand; first impressions

### 1. Introduction

A communicative act between two or more people consists of much more than the words that are used. To fully comprehend what an interlocutor is trying to convey one must also take into account non-verbal aspects of communication. The *Human Instruction Manual* (2013) describes various forms of non-verbal communication including facial expressions (how each part of the face - lips, mouth, cheeks, and eyebrows – is moved during conversation), hand movements (the gestures made with the hands), oculosics (the way one looks at an interlocutor people, use of eye contact, eye movements e.g. rolling the eyes etc.), posture (the position of the back, head and body when standing and/or walking), paralanguage (tone of voice, speed of speech, vocal pitch etc.), proxemics (the distance between two interlocutors), kinesics (how the body as a whole moves when talking, performing a specific behaviour etc.), and haptics (physical contact with someone during interaction e.g. touching an interlocutor's hand or arm).

When two people share the same cultural context, upbringing, language, social status and preferences, and also have a close relationship there is a very high probability that they will communicate effectively, but this is still not guaranteed. When communication partners come from different cultures there is a much higher probability of misunderstanding. A smile may convey happiness in one culture and shyness in another. Making eye contact with an interlocutor is a sign of respect in Western cultures whereas in some Eastern cultures it would seem confrontational. Other forms of non-verbal communication – hand gestures, touching, inter-personal distance – are just as open to misinterpretation. One's impression of another person is based more on non-verbal expressions than on words (Gamble & Gamble, 2013). One type of non-verbal cue – body posture – seems to be culturally universal. An upright spine conveys positivity and confidence, whereas leaning forwards typically conveys sadness or despair (Normoyle, Liu, Kapadia, Badler, & Jorg, 2013). The aim of this study was to describe how body postures are interpreted in Thai culture with a view to extending the research to analysis of interpretations of body posture in other cultures in the near future.

### 2. Literature Review

When our ancestors were more animal than human they communicated successfully with one another through noises, glances, facial expressions and gestures. Words were not needed. Over time words and linguistic codes became necessary as early humans sought to communicate the more complicated ideas that were necessary for the development of humanity.

Dael, Mortillaro, and Scherer (2012b, pp. 20–23) noted that “In *The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals*, Darwin (1872) illustrated the continuity of emotion expression between humans and animals by comparing distinctive body postures and movements in response to emotion eliciting situations”. Similarly Sebeok (2001) noted the importance of non-verbal signs for Einstein and his model of the universe, “as he wrote to a colleague in 1945: ‘The words or the language, as they are written or spoken, do not seem to play any role in my mechanism of thought. The psychical entities which seem to serve as elements in thought are certain signs and more or less clear images which can be ‘voluntarily’ reproduced and combined’” (Sebeok (2001, p.23).

As Darwin noted, humans have expressed fear, happiness, sadness, and other feelings through their bodies rather than through language since the beginning of time. Posture and movement cues were sufficiently informative to enable people to communicate what was in their mind: “The twinkle in his eye. The edge in her voice. The knowing look of their smiles. The rigidity of his posture. The confidence in her walk. [...] How closely you stand to another. Each of the phrases highlights a non-verbal cue that offers a clue to the attitudes, feelings, and personality of a person” (Gamble & Gamble, 2013, p. 151). Verbal communication relies on a shared linguistic code whereas non-verbal communication involves conveying information using the whole of the body - the sounds that we make, the movement of our body when we walk and when we stand, the way we look at somebody, the clothes we wear, whether we touch other people while talking or not, and even the distance separating one interlocutor from the other can convey three times as much information as the words (Gamble & Gamble, 2013).

Non-verbal cues often convey the information that our words do not; it can convey what our heart feels and our mind thinks. Our bodies can be divided into different parts which we use to convey different feelings, moods, and thoughts. Smiling is usually associated with happiness or even shyness, whereas a frown conveys frustration, sadness or tension. Hand gestures are often used to reinforce and refine verbal communication, along with paralinguistic cues such as tone of voice, speed of speech and vocal pitch. Mehrabian and Friar (1969, cited in Kleinsmith, De Silva, & Bianchi-Berthouze, 2006, p. 2) noted that “Whole body postures are also shown to be quite important for conveying emotion (indeed, 55% of non-verbal communication is said to be expressed through body language)”. Kleinsmith et al. (2006) argued that more than half of the information conveyed in communication is transmitted non-verbally and others have suggested that the vast majority of communication is non-verbal: “Research has shown that just seven percent of human communication is through the actual words. Ninety-three percent of what we communicate with others is non-verbal” (*The Human Instruction Manual*, 2013, 1:21).

Humans express their emotions and feelings through words and gestures, but that is not the full story. Humans feel the way they feel towards others because of the input they receive i.e. the information and knowledge that is perceived through the senses. The way an individual decodes these inputs influences his or her output. Output is the communicative productions of individuals, how they interact with one another, their action, gestures etc. Barrett and Russell (2015, p.51) argued that the way we think and act is determined by previous experiences and background, as well as input from others: “Psychological construction hypothesises that emotions are not determined solely by sensory changes in a body. Emotions are perceptions that, in part, are a function of the perceiver’s prior knowledge and experience”. Many researchers have tried to analyse how humans convey their feelings (e.g. Griffiths, 1997; Barrett, 2006; Barrett and Russell, 2015). Barrett (2006) noted that facial micro expressions, body position and vocal pitch all convey information about how we feel to our interlocutors. Nevertheless, these ways of showing emotions, known as natural-kind models, vary from person to person and so decoding non-verbal cues is a complex communicative challenge. When a person is happy, angry or sad, he/she performs a series of mechanism – body movements. Take happiness, for instance: facial expressions such as smiling or raising one’s tone of voice are common indications of happiness. Not only do facial expressions change with mood, so also do arm movements and the position of the head and the back. Barrett (2006, p. 31) pointed out that

“By positing some sort of causal mechanism for each emotion that harnesses the face, the voice, and the body, researchers are, in effect, presuming that each natural kind of emotion has an essence or some sort of ‘causal homeostatic mechanism’ (Griffiths, 1997) that initiates a set of correlated responses that maintain and reinforce one another.”

It might be possible to determine what non-verbal cues are most frequently used to express particular emotions by analysing gestures individually and correlating them with emotions. Barrett (2006, p. 32) explained that “If one behaviour (say, a voluntary action) is present but another (say, facial expression) is not, then it is assumed that the tendency was there, but that some other mechanism (e.g., a display rule) interfered with its expression.” When analysing body expressions it is important to consider both the person that is performing them and the audience receiving and interpreting them. The position of the trunk and head are important clues to how the participants in a conversation feel, what they want to say, what they mean to say, and how they react to what they hear (Clay, Couture, & Nigay, 2007). Schindler, Gool, and de Gelder (2008, p. 2) noted that “Recently, researchers have also turned to emotional body language, i.e. the expression of emotions through human body pose and/or body motion” and Bull (1987) also stated that posture conveys very valuable psychological information about personality and about the impression that an individual is trying to create as it influences the relationship between interlocutors and the outcome of interactions.

Cuddy, Wilmuth and Carney (2012, p. 3) stated:

“In both human and non-human primates, expansive, open postures reflect high power, whereas contractive, closed postures reflect low power. [...] Not only do these postures reflect power, they also *produce* it; in contrast to adopting low power poses, adopting high power poses increases explicit and implicit feelings of power and dominance, risk-taking behaviour, action orientation, pain tolerance, and testosterone (the dominance hormone), while reducing stress, anxiety, and cortisol (the stress hormone).”

As Wallbott (1998) and Dael, Mortillaro, and Scherer (2012a) have noted the way we move our body and the way we stand express, to some extent, how we feel at that particular moment. When the body is held erect and the head is upright an impression of joy and pride is conveyed. Griffin (2012) noted that individuals typically demonstrate confidence by placing their hands behind their back, sticking out their chin and keeping their trunk erect. Others have made similar observations: “Posture can be a signal for status; someone who is going to take charge sits in an upright posture” (Hinde, 1972, p. 248) and “High status people, the big boss, ministers and the like are often seen walking with their head up, chin out and one palm gripping the other hand behind the back. It is a superiority and confidence gesture” (Kumar, 1998, p.411). The combination of an erect trunk and an expanding chest and squared shoulders suggests anger or rage, whereas a hanging head, contracted chest and general shrinking in of the body conveys sadness and fear. Clay et al. (2007, p. 15) noted that “if we consider sadness, the body position also plays a role: the shoulders lower, the body is bowing. [...] The chest position reflects the muscular tonus. When we are bored for example, the chest lowers”. Pressing one’s arms to one’s trunk, raising one’s shoulder and leaning forward can suggest disgust; however Bull (1967, p. 23) suggested that “forward lean or a decrease in backward lean indicate a positive attitude”. Discrepancies such as this are usually related to cultural differences, as it is shown in the analysis section of this paper. Finally, turning the entire body away from an individual communicates shame or contempt. Cuddy and colleagues (2012) argued that adopting a high-power pose immediately elicits more helpful, more positive responses from other participants in an interaction. Lower and laid-back poses are usually associated with negative or introverted feelings.

When discussing the role of posture in the creation of first impressions it is essential to distinguish between static postures and postures adopted during movement. When a person is moving the positions of the back, head, shoulders and chin alter, but so too do the positions of the arms and legs. The pose adopted whilst walking conveys information which can, in conjunction with the position of the back, convey an emotion. When analysing static postures, the movement of the extremities (arms and legs) disappear. Coulson (2004) noted that static postures carry enough information to enable interlocutors to form an accurate impression of mood. Coulson (2004, p. 132) concluded from studies of static postures that:

“Anger is predicted by backwards head bend and the absence of a backwards chest bend, no abdominal twist, and arms raised forwards and upwards. [...] For fear, head backwards and no abdominal twist are predictive, and there is no effect of chest bend or upper arm position. Forearms are raised and weight transfer is either backwards or forward. [...] Happiness is characterised by head backwards and no forwards movement of the chest. Arms are raised above shoulder level and straight at the elbow, weight transfer is not predictive. [...] Sadness is the only emotion characterised by a forwards head bend, and in addition includes forwards chest bend, no twisting, and arms at the side of the trunk. Weight transfer is not predictive.”

Our first impressions of people, before we have interacted with them, are based on non-verbal cues and our interpretation of such cues is influenced by cultural background. Our observations of everyday behaviour and our experience of interactions in the society and culture in which we live influence how we perceive other people. Kleinsmith et al. (2006, p. 2) stated that “the way in which emotions are expressed and controlled as well as the interpretation of emotion is clearly shaped by culture”. In Europe looking straight into somebody’s eyes can be seen as respectful, whereas in Japan it would be considered very rude. It is thought that hand gestures show more cross-cultural variation than other forms of non-verbal communication, for example the Spanish sign for ‘OK’ would be a very rude gesture in Turkey and in several African countries, including Nigeria. Understanding how non-verbal cues are interpreted in particular countries and cultures is vital to avoiding misunderstandings. Nevertheless, there is one particular aspect of non-verbal communication which seems to vary very little across the globe - posture. Research into cultural differences in communication has been going on for decades, however, Kleinsmith et al. (2006, p. 2) pointed out that “few researchers are examining the cross-cultural differences of emotion recognition in whole body posture.” Studies such as the ones carried out by Schindler et al. (2008) have shown that facial expressions have very similar connotations in diverse cultural settings, however there has been very little research into how different cultural groups interpret particular postural cues. The aim of this study, therefore, was to identify the meanings attributed to particular static postures by Thai citizens. To comprehend fully why our respondents interpreted particular postures as they did, it is necessary to have some understanding of Thai culture and Thai non-verbal communication.

Smutkupt (1976) was one of the first authors to compare Thai cultural communicative behaviours with those of other cultural clusters, more specifically with North American communicative behaviour. Smutkupt stated that from a very early age Thai citizens are taught strict non-verbal communication rules, including what behaviours are considered right and wrong and how to show respect for others. Most of Smutkupt’s findings relate to the dominant religion, Buddhism, which is the basis of the Thai moral code. Smutkupt (1976, p.22) describes several very important non-verbal cues that are specific to Thai culture and very noticeable to foreigners: “Downcast eyes are a mannerism that is dominant in the communication process among Thais. [...] Therefore eye contact is absent and has no significance in daily communication”. Avoiding eye contact is a gesture of respect, humbleness and politeness (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). Although nowadays younger people in big cities such as Bangkok make eye contact more often, avoidance of eye contact is still the cultural norm (Burnard & Gill, 2009). To show respect to the person with whom one is communicating - particularly if that person is older or of higher social status- one also bows one’s head, hunches one’s shoulder and leans forward when greeting him or her (this is known as ‘bowing’), as well as saying ‘thank you’ (Smutkupt, 1976; Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy, 2013). This practice derives in part from the Buddhist monks who usually walk with “their shoulders hunch[ed] forward; their heads bow[ed] slightly; and their eyes gaz[ing] a few steps ahead on the ground” (Smutkupt, 1976, p.38). In Thai culture the head is the most important part of the body and this can be perceived in routine communicative acts; the lower status participant in a communicative act must hold his or her head lower than that of the higher status participant (Smutkupt, 1976). The meaning conveyed by the position of the back and head clearly varies between cultures. Coulson (2004) stated that inclination of the head and chest denotes sadness, whereas in Thai culture this is a sign of respect. As we noted above, Barrett and Russell (2015) have reiterated that the way in which first impressions are decoded is influenced by cultural factors. This paper analyses how Thai citizens interpret several static postures. In order to understand how our participants decoded the images they were shown the reader must have an understanding of Thai culture; the brief overview provided in the previous paragraphs was written with this in mind.

### **3. Methodology**

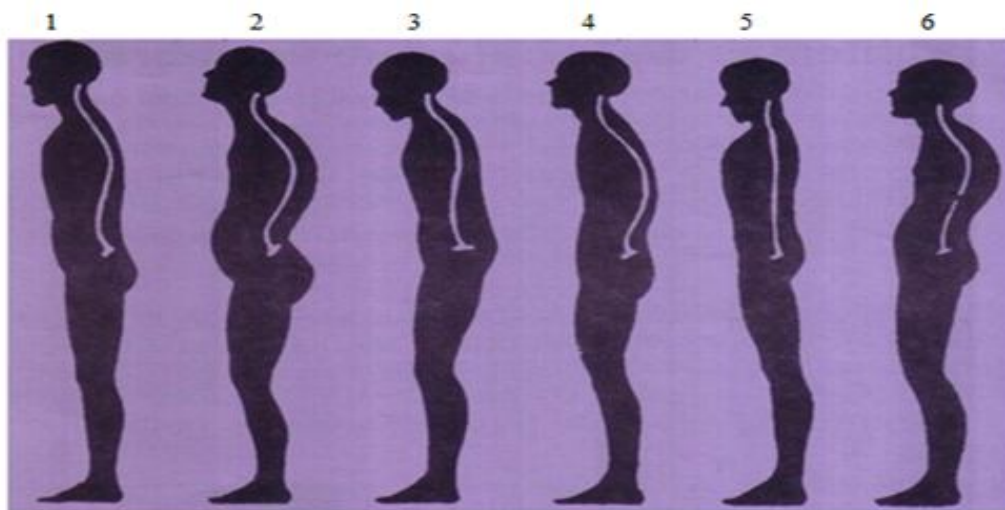
This research took place at Stamford International University in Bangkok, Thailand. This institution was chosen for its diverse student body. Almost 45% of students are international students from 109 countries (Stamford International University, 2016); the other 55% are Thai students. Although the sample was comprised entirely of students from a single university the diversity in their backgrounds in terms of culture, upbringing, social status, educational history, and field of study make this study very interesting. This study had an initial sample of 802 participants from 65 different nationalities, but only data from Thai citizens ( $n = 431$ ) were used in the analyses reported here as the numbers of participants of other nationalities were insufficient for valid analysis. Data were collected from February 2015 to August 2015.

A questionnaire containing six postural silhouettes and questions about age, nationality and gender was handed out in multiple classes at Stamford International University over a period of seven months. The questionnaire asked participants to write the first adjective that came to mind on looking at each of the silhouettes. This research is quantitative in nature as due to the shortness of the time required to complete the questionnaire and the large number of participants.

The researcher, a professor at Stamford International University, first contacted other professors asking for permission to come to their classes and ask their students to complete a short survey. There were no refusals. All the classes were part of the international programmes of the three faculties in the university: Business Administration, Liberal Arts and Information Technology. Students enrolled on the international programmes are required to have a minimum competence in English and thus the researcher could be sure that they would understand the questionnaire and instructions. Before the questionnaires were handed out the researcher spent five to ten minutes explaining the purpose of the study to the students to ensure that they responded appropriately; this included giving brief definitions of non-verbal communication and body posture. Students completed the questionnaire individually and silently, taking between three and six minutes to do so. The researcher walked around the classroom making sure they understood the instructions and were completing the form correctly. On each classroom visit the researcher asked whether students had already completed the questionnaire before distributing it, to avoid a biased sample due to multiple responses from certain participants.

After the questionnaires were completed the data was immediately transferred to a spreadsheet for subsequent analysis. Microsoft Excel functions were used to group the data according to demographic variables then by repeated adjectives. The adjectives most frequently used to describe each silhouette were evaluated with respect to definition, connotations and communicative meaning in the light of relevant literature. The six silhouettes were taken from La Bioguia.com, the largest sustainable digital community in Latin America (Blanco, 2014). Blanco, the author of the online article, states that the silhouettes convey diverse impressions, primarily on the basis of research carried out by the Esalen Institute in California and by Jose Manuel Guevara, a communication and body language consultant. The images shown in Figure A are described according to number and numbered from left to right:

**Figure A: Image taken from La Bioguia.com (Blanco, 2014)**



*Silhouette number 1:* Erect back, shoulders, and head: conveys confidence and high self-esteem.

*Silhouette number 2:* Stooped over and looking up: open to ideas, ready to help, relaxed.

*Silhouette number 3:* Looking down: lack of interest, sadness, depression, and tiredness.

*Silhouette number 4:* Looking straight-ahead, erect head but back slightly bowed: tired, resting, patient.

*Silhouette number 5:* Very erect head and back: not caring what happens or who is around; arrogant and somewhat aggressive.

*Silhouette number 6:* Looking straight-ahead, leaning head, and hunched back: lack of enthusiasm, sad, tired, depressed, low self-esteem (translated from Spanish to English; Blanco, 2014).

The silhouettes showing a figure with the back hunched or leaning forwards (silhouettes 1, 2, 3, and 6) convey positive and negative meanings related to interest, enthusiasm and high self-esteem or depression, sadness and low self-esteem. These results are consistent with those of Coulson (2004) who found that a position in which the head was tilted upwards and the chest not leaning forwards connoted happiness, whereas a downward tilt to the head combined with a forward-leaning chest, as in silhouette 3, connoted sadness.

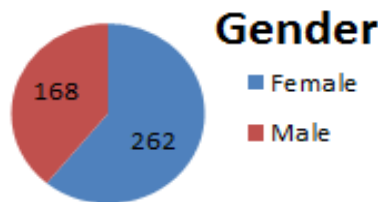
Winters (2005) used a similar method to analyse the emotions conveyed by a posture. Thirty young participants aged at least 18 years old who were resident in New York were asked to describe postures by selecting adjectives from a list. The main difference between that study and this one is the objective; Winters (2005) demonstrated that the format in which images were presented (photographs; computer images) and the method used for evaluation (closed or open questions) had a big impact on the responses whereas as the aim of this study was to determine what emotions were elicited by the six static figures when they were first presented. Other researchers have used photographs in research on perception of postures and have claimed that this produces accurate results: “Walters and Walk (1986) claim that recognition of emotion from photographs of posed expressions with face and hands obscured is comparable in accuracy to recognition of facial expressions” (Coulson, 2004, p.118). In a study using photographs Mehrabian (1968) found that “a 20 degree forward lean was perceived as more positive than a 20 degree backward lean” (Bull, 1987, p.24). This finding is partially consistent with Blanco’s (2014) study and this study as the analysis of results in the next section demonstrates.

**4. Results**

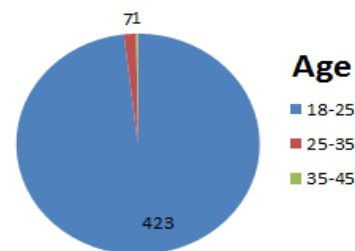
The questionnaire distributed to students at Stamford International University consisted of three demographic questions (asking about gender, nationality and age) and six postural silhouettes which respondents were asked to describe using a single, freely chosen adjective.

Figures B and C present demographic information about the sample

**Figure B: Gender of participants**



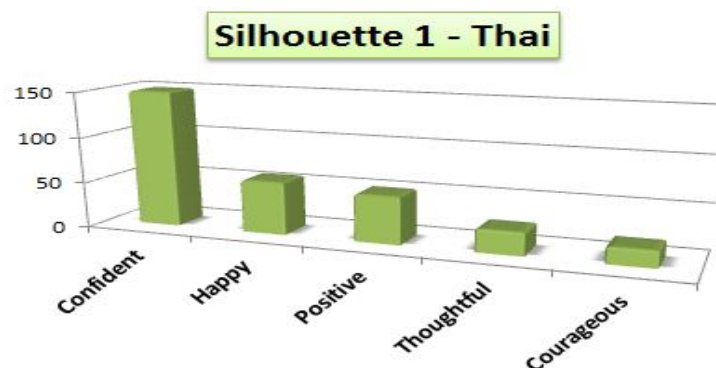
**Figure C: Age of participants**



As for the results of each silhouette, the researcher analysed each questionnaire individually, paying attention to the most frequent occurrences given by the participants.

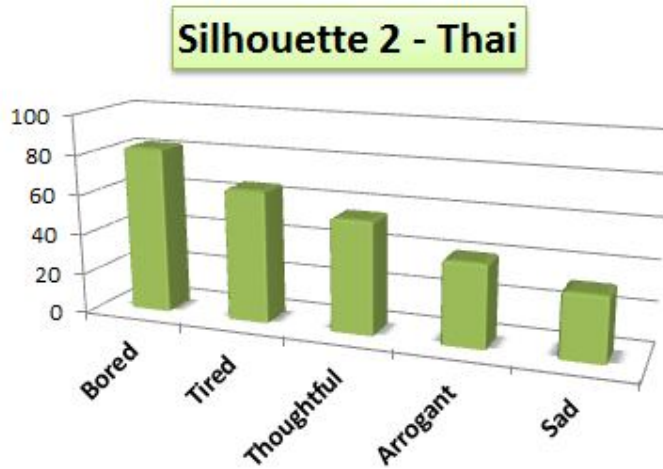
Figure D, E, F, G, H and I show the five adjectives most commonly used by Thai respondents to describe each silhouette. In all cases these five adjectives represent over half the responses.

**Figure D. Silhouette 1:** 70.3% of responses (303/431) are represented in the graph



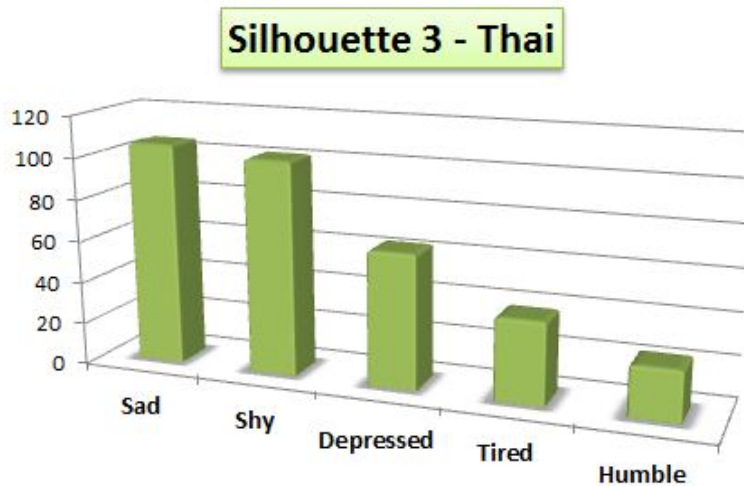
Silhouette 1 was generally described using positive adjectives: confident; happy; positive; thoughtful; and courageous.

**Figure E. Silhouette 2:** 64.5% of responses (278/431) are represented in the graph



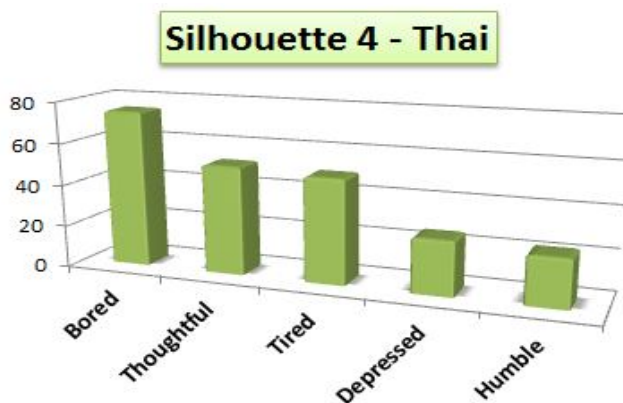
makes the legs bowed. Participants described this figure bored, tired, thoughtful, arrogant or sad. Four of the five most commonly used adjectives have negative connotations.

**Figure F. Silhouette 3:** 77.7% of responses (335/431) are represented in the graph.



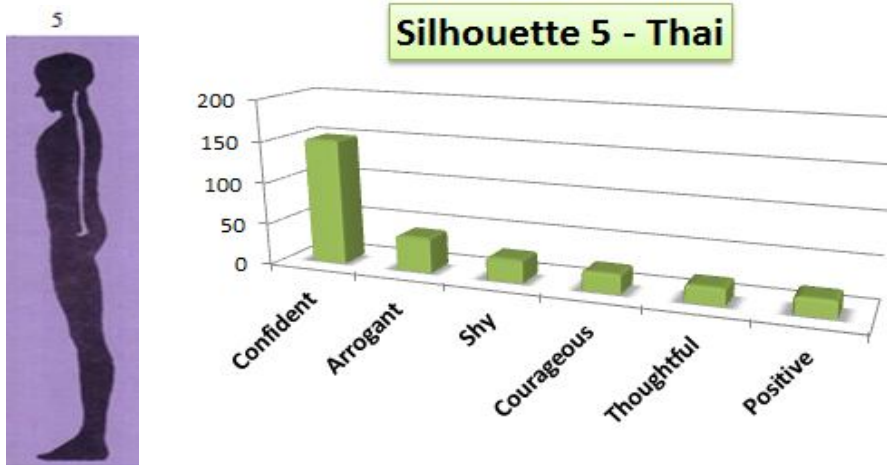
Silhouette 3 has the same curved back as silhouette two; however the figure in silhouette two is looking down. Participants saw this figure as sad, shy, depressed, tired or humble. Three of these adjectives have negative connotations.

**Figure G. Silhouette 4:** 52.4% of responses (226/431) are represented in the graph



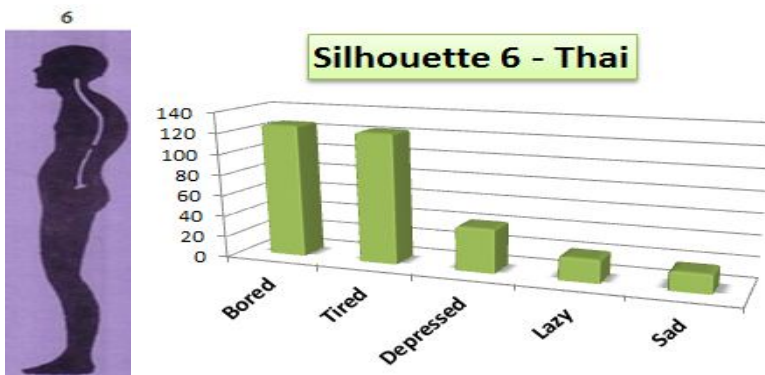
Silhouette 4 is very similar to silhouette three although the head position is slightly different: the figure is looking straight ahead and the back is also straight. Participants' responses did not seem to be influenced by these features, however, as the figure created a similar impression to silhouettes two and three. The adjectives commonly applied to the figure included three negative adjectives, bored, tired and depressed, and two positive adjectives, thoughtful and humble.

**Figure H. Silhouette 5:** 65.6% of responses (283/431) are represented in the graph



The adjectives chosen to describe silhouette 5 had were generally more positive than those used to describe silhouettes two, three and four. The figure has a very erect posture and the chin is tilted downwards. The most commonly used adjectives were confident and arrogant, followed by shy, courageous, thoughtful and positive. Six adjectives are depicted because the latter three were all chosen by the same number of participants.

**Figure I. Silhouette 6:** 77.2% of responses (333/431) are represented in the graph



Silhouette 6 was the only one described solely in negative terms: bored, tired, depressed, lazy and sad.

### 5. Analysis and Discussion

When analysing the responses of the 431 Thai participants the researcher found that the answers were similar with minor variations. The silhouettes were analysed in pairs or individually, depending on the similarities between them; this is why they are not discussed in numerical order.

#### Silhouettes 3 and 6

These silhouettes reached the highest level of unanimity among all the participants. Both figures have their backs hunched although the curvature of number six’s back is more pronounced. Silhouette three is looking down whereas silhouette six looks straight ahead. The curved back seemed to dominate respondents’ first impressions of these figures, apparently conveying tiredness, sadness or depression. Respondents perceived these silhouettes as belong to a person going through an unhappy or difficult time, a tired person, or someone who is not interested in what is happening around him or her. These two silhouettes were described in predominantly negative terms, with adjectives relating to fatigue, sorrow and lack of social interaction. It was interesting that the adjectives used by Thai participants did not seem to reflect the traditional cultural meanings described by Smutkupt (1976), who stated that looking down with one’s back slightly hunched indicates respect. The only positive adjective commonly used to describe these figures was ‘humble’, which is seen a typical characteristic of Thai people. The discrepancy between the traditional meaning and the perceptions of Thai respondents in this sample may be due to the distinctive organisational culture of Stamford International University, which is very different from that of public Thai universities. Stamford University is a low power-distance environment where bowed greetings between teachers and students are rare. Stamford University is more westernized than other Thai universities and is by far the most international, with students representing 104 nationalities. This may have influenced how the Thai participants in our sample perceive posture.



### ***Silhouette 4***

Silhouette shares the slightly curved back of silhouettes three and six, but the figure is looking straight ahead rather than downwards. Looking straight ahead, with one's back only slightly curved seems to convey a positive impression. Two of the five most commonly used adjectives were positive, thoughtful and humble; both suggest a person who is considerate and modest. In this case, the straight position of the head seems to have had more influence on respondents' perceptions than the hunched back. It appears that a simple change in how one carries one's head is sufficient to produce a large shift in how one is perceived. It is also notable that the adjectives used to describe the figure related not to happiness, but to being rational, cautious and caring about people, personality traits that are valued in the Buddhist moral code. In this sense respondents' perceptions were consistent with their cultural beliefs; however they are not consistent with the traditional avoidance of eye contact in Thai culture (Smutkupt, 1976). Despite globalization and the influence of one culture on another, avoidance of eye contact remains the norm in Thai culture. Traditionally looking someone straight in the eye was considered very assertive, almost aggressive (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012), but this appears to be changing if the perceptions of the young Thai citizens in this study are representative. The Thai students in our sample do not seem to regard direct eye contact in the same way, as their responses to silhouette 4 shows.

### ***Silhouette 2***

The last silhouette that has an arched back, as silhouette six does, is silhouette two. Both silhouettes show figures with much curved backs, but they are distinguished by the head position: number six is looking straight ahead whereas number two is looking up. The differences in head position were clearly reflected in participants' discrepant perceptions of the two silhouettes. Silhouette 2 elicited the most diverse set of adjectives. The most commonly used negative adjectives were bored, tired, arrogant and sad; the only commonly used positive adjective was thoughtful. The main source of disparity in perceptions of this silhouette was that some participants appeared to focus on the upward tilt of the head, perceiving this as arrogant, whereas others paid more attention to the hunched back, taking this as an indication of boredom, tiredness or sadness. There was no consensus in the connotations of this silhouette; one of the most commonly used adjectives was thoughtful, which has a positive connotations, suggesting a person who thinks before acting and cares about others, but others saw the figure as arrogant, possibly influenced by the upward tilt of the head. The responses here, somehow, portrayed Thai culture when it comes to look up and stick the chin out, which is not a very common gesture among Thais since looking down is a symbol of respect whereas looking up indicates contempt or scorn. Arrogant was the fourth most commonly used adjective, suggesting that respondents paid more attention to the alignment of the back than the head position. This interpretation is inconsistent with Smutkupt's (1976) statement that the head is the most important part of the body in Thai culture; once again it appears that being in an international environment in the university may have influenced the participants' perceptions.

### ***Silhouette 1***

The only two silhouettes showing figures with a straight back are silhouettes 1 and 5. In both cases the majority of adjectives used had positive connotations, partly due to the position of the back. Cuddy and colleagues (2012) showed that holding the back, head, and shoulders in an open position conveys and encourages happiness, interaction and positive energy in general. Silhouette 1 is that of a slightly bent figure looking straight ahead. The adjectives used to describe it all suggested a happy, confident person, going through a good period in life; someone with a positive attitude. The respondents also described the figure as being that of someone who is willing to take risks and is unafraid: the adjective courageous was commonly used. The upright posture and erect head position suggest someone who believes in him or herself, who is happy with life at the moment and who has a positive attitude to life. The only adjective shared with the previous silhouettes (2 and 4) is 'thoughtful'. The silhouette might give the impression of slightly looking down, which may give the impression of thought. The head position is what made participants interpret this silhouette somewhat similarly to silhouettes 2, 4 and 5 despite the difference in the position of the back: erect rather than hunched. This is the only silhouette perceived in ways which are consistent with traditional Thai culture. The back is erect but slightly hunched and the head is tilted slightly downwards, both of which are characteristic of a Thai person who shows respect and has good manners (Smutkupt, 1976).

### ***Silhouette 5***

This silhouette attracted several positive responses. The position of the back (erect) combined with that of the head (looking down slightly) produced a mixture of opinions much as silhouette 1 did. Some respondents paid attention to the position of the back, describing the silhouette as that of a confident or even arrogant person, whereas those who paid attention to the head position described it as that of a shy person. The other three positive adjectives used were courageous, thoughtful and positive. This was the silhouette which attracted the most discrepant descriptions; courage and shyness are traits not usually found together. This discrepancy gives the idea that the perception of another person is also influenced by individual characteristics instead of only cultural backgrounds, but it also, somehow, represents the non-verbal patterns in Thai culture (physical etiquette is observed and the body is used to show respect) as the erect back shows elegance and the slight downwards look shows respect (Samovar et al., 2013). Silhouettes 5 and 1 seem to represent what Thais consider to be 'polite' posture.

Once the analysis of the six silhouettes has been carried out, when comparing it to the original source (Figure A), the researcher found out that all the silhouettes except number two were described in similar terms by our sample and by the original source. Silhouette 2 was described in the original source as that of a relaxed person; however although some participants in this study used this adjective to describe silhouette 2, with its curved back and up-tilted head this was not a common choice. Most participants saw the figure as tired, bored or sad. Not only were our participants' perceptions of silhouette 2 different from the way it is described by the original source, they were also at odds with traditional Thai interpretations of non-verbal cues. Silhouettes 1 and 5 were the only ones described in terms consistent with traditional Thai norms: an erect back and a slightly downward look indicate respect in Thai culture. The descriptions of the other four silhouettes were not consistent with the traditional Thai interpretations of posture, for example Thai people traditionally show respect to older or higher status people by standing leaning forwards and looking down, but our participants described silhouettes showing this posture in negative terms. This departure from the traditional cultural norm may be due to the international environment of the university at which the students in our sample were studying and the multicultural background most of them have.

### ***6. Research Limitations***

This study was carried out at a single site over seven months. Due to time and location constraints it was not possible to collect data elsewhere. In one sense all the participants had very similar backgrounds: they were aged between 18 and 25 years. Nearly half of them were exposed to an international environment due to the fact they were studying at an international university, and also had an international background because their parents were from other countries or because they had previously lived abroad. Some students have an extensive international and professional history whereas others have come straight from high school. The way people perceive and think about others is influenced by upbringing and experience; it is not, therefore, feasible to recruit a large sample of people with exactly the same background. Administering the same questionnaire to working adults from different countries and diverse backgrounds might produce different results from those we obtained in a sample of Thai students with experience of interacting with people from other cultures.

The last limitation presented in this paper deals with the fact that some silhouettes, such as numbers two and six, could represent people that simply have a backache instead of walking with their back hunched. Taking that into consideration, if a person does not have a backache and simply stands or walks with his or her back hunched, the ideas mentioned in the analysis of this paper may apply.

### ***7. Recommendations for Further Research***

As with all research, there is room for improvement and progress. When analysing emotions and non-verbal communication the personality and cultural background of the people involved and the context must be taken into consideration. Behaviour depends on circumstances, personality and worldview. Opinions vary according to personal experience, mood, background, personality and surroundings, amongst other things. The qualitative aspect of this study addressed the subjective thoughts of the participants. Their opinions towards the same silhouettes may change in the future. The purpose of the study was to gather the most accurate data taking into account diverse backgrounds. However, a year might be a short period of time to fully answer this research question. More time, more participants, more nationalities, and more backgrounds should be analysed to further test this. Below we suggest how limitations of this study could be addressed.

- All the silhouettes presented in this survey were of men. It would be interesting to repeat the survey using identifiably female silhouettes to see if the same adjectives are applied to the postures when they are those of a woman.
- We used silhouettes that were stylised depictions of a human body rather than images of real people. It is likely that respondents' background and personal history would come into play if they were evaluating images showing facial and body features or images depicting specific nationalities and styles of clothing.
- The images used in this study do not show movement. The focus is on the position of the back, head and shoulders. Participants might form clearer or more accurate impressions of personality or mood if they were shown short, silent videos of people walking in ways consistent with the static postures used in this study.
- Comparing perceptions of silhouettes depicted with and without the head would provide insight into the importance of head position in non-verbal communication.
- Our sample was limited to Thai students. It would be interesting to compare their perceptions with those of students of another nationality. Similarly comparisons with older Thai nationals or Thai students at a Thai public university would cast light on transmission of cultural norms from one generation to another and on the prevalence of such norms in contemporary Thai society.

## 8. Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to discover how Thai citizens interpret static postures. First impressions are based not just on posture but also on clothing, gait, facial expressions and nationality, amongst other factors. The images used in the questionnaire depicted static postures in which the position of the head and back were the most important cues. To analyse the responses given by our sample of young Thai citizens it is necessary to understand how non-verbal cues are used in Thai culture. Although all the respondents in this study were Thai nationals, they were students at Stamford International University, which is a university with a very high proportion of international students, with 104 different nationalities represented. It seems that the culture of the university may have influenced students' perceptions as their descriptions were not consistent with traditional Thai cultural norms for posture.

Buddhism is the dominant religion in Thailand and has a strong influence on behaviour. When communicating it is usual to show respect by inclining one's head and trunk slightly and avoiding eye contact; bowing is a common way of greeting someone. The findings of this study suggest that the younger generation do not perceive eye contact to be as rude as it used to be. The degree of the bent of the head and the back has also seemed to change over the years in Thai culture; postures involving a bent back were perceived more negatively than erect postures. Traditionally the higher the status of an interlocutor the lower one should bow when greeting him or her. Our respondents perceived a very hunched back as an indication of tiredness, boredom, sadness or depression whereas as more erect postures conveyed happiness or confidence. The head is the most important part of the body in Thai culture and looking straight ahead seemed to convey a more positive impression than looking down or sticking one's chin out. The responses of our sample were more closely aligned with international findings than with traditional Thai cultural norms. In conclusion, young Thai students perceived an erect posture and straight-ahead gaze more positively than a hunched, downward-looking posture.

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