Chapter XI

The Exchange of Emotional Content in Business Communications:
A Comparison of PC and Mobile E-Mail Users

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ABSTRACT

This study compared the exchange of emotional content in PC and mobile e-mail in business-related discussions. Forty American business people were divided into two groups (PC and mobile e-mail users) and were then assigned to anonymous discussion pairs who exchanged a total of six messages on a predetermined topic. When a message was sent, the writers completed two questionnaires related to 12 target emotions: One questionnaire assessed the emotions they experienced and another estimated their partner’s emotional reaction. E-mail readers filled out similar questionnaires. Statistical analysis showed that when emotional exchange was successful, mobile e-mail users more accurately predicted positive emotions than did PC e-mail users. Conversely, when emotional exchange was unsuccessful, mobile e-mail users failed to accurately exchange negative emotions far more than their PC using counterparts. These findings indicate that the communication medium used may influence the exchange of emotional content in text-based communications.
INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented growth of mobile communication options and capabilities in recent years has drastically increased the flexibility in and opportunities for transacting business for both companies and customers. The widespread adoption of mobile communication devices facilitates communication within and between companies, and between producers and consumers. While such devices enable workers to largely overcome the limitations of time and place, this capacity presents its own set of challenges and potential problems. Among these are the challenges of accurately predicting the e-mail reader’s emotional reactions and estimating the e-mail writer’s state of mind.

Previous research on computer-mediated communications (CMC) indicates that the fewer paralinguistic cues in CMC limit the sender’s ability to effectively and accurately transmit their intended emotions and meanings relative to face-to-face interactions (Kato, Y. & Akahori 2006). However, little or no research has been done on the relative ability of text-based communications (e.g. PC and mobile) to convey the effectively exchange emotional content. In order to address this gap, this chapter presents a study emotional exchange in mediated business communications, comparing computer-based e-mail (PC e-mail) and mobile phone-based e-mail messaging.

The current variety of available communication tools extends our ability to communicate at almost any time in almost any location. Modern business communications are no longer limited to traditional CMC contexts as the use of mobile communication devices has increased significantly. Internet-capable mobile phones have gone from being an executive status symbol to an essential business tool used by all levels in the organization. Monitoring e-mail traffic from any location at any time has become commonplace, if not expected, among users in many business sectors. However, the nature of mobile communication devices seems different than the computer-based options. These differences include limited screen size, keyboard size, and data transfer rates that empirically result in shorter, less detailed communications.

The ease with which we are able to communicate makes it easy to overlook that these technologies are facilitating the interaction of complex human beings. One element that contributes greatly to our complexity is our emotions. Emotions are fundamental to human behavior and their transfer in face-to-face (FTF) contexts is challenging and previous research (Kato & Akahori 2004a, 200b) indicates that mediated communications, especially those without the benefit of non-verbal cues, complicates this process and increases misunderstandings over FTF communications.

The current study is based on a Japanese study (Kato, S., Kato, & Akahori 2006) that examined the transmission and interpretation of emotions in text-based communications between Japanese college students. That study, described in greater detail below, concluded that there is a tendency for negative or unpleasant emotions (like anger and anxiety) to increase when there is a lack of emotional cues in the transmission. Such a lack of cues increases the chances of misunderstanding between the communication partners.

However, Kato et al.’s (2006) conclusions were based on the study of a single type of text-based communications and compared successful emotional exchanges with unsuccessful emotional exchanges. The study presented here expands Kato et al.’s work, initially by comparing two common forms of mediated communications, in this case PC and mobile e-mail, to assess their relative ability to convey emotional content. In addition, the current study applies Kato et al.’s approach to a new cultural context (i.e. America rather than Japan) and examines the communications of a different demographic group (i.e. business people rather than college students).

Applying Kato et al.’s approach to a different cultural context is an important first step in what