Moderating Effects of Novelty and Spontaneity on Personal Electronic Communication at Work

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study aims to examine the moderating effect of novelty seeking and spontaneity on the relationship between asynchronous and synchronous personal electronic communication at work. Hierarchical moderated regression analyses were used to analyze a survey of 110 white-collar employees working in the midwestern region of the United States. Data analysis revealed the moderating effects of spontaneity and novelty seeking on the transition from personal asynchronous to synchronous communication, emphasizing the role of novelty seeking and spontaneity as the precursors to higher media synchronicity—a transition from conveyance to convergence processes as observed in various hedonic settings. Strategies for workplace communication management are discussed.

Keywords: Asynchronous, Instant Messaging, Media Synchronicity Theory, Novelty Seeking, Short Message Service, Spontaneity, Synchronous, Text Messaging

INTRODUCTION

In the modern workplace, employee communication can take place on any computing platform, whether stationary or mobile. While e-mails are a typical form of asynchronous interaction, newer synchronous communication, such as instant messaging (IM) and short messaging service (SMS), have expanded the realm of interpersonal interactions. Not only do these real-time synchronous interactions provide an enhancement to traditional asynchronous e-mails, they also have broadened employees’ social networks within and beyond the work-related boundary.

Personal electronic communication has changed the ways in which employees enjoy themselves at work. A variety of office communication systems used for different self-gratifying purposes can be transmitted furtively through the workplace communication systems. With the emergence of various social networking applications and newer modes of electronic media, communicating electronically at work—informal chats, friendship invitations, casual meetings, and humor—undeniably blur

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the nature of work and non-work boundaries, contributing to the “spillover” effect that blends work-related activities with social and recreational needs (Rouibah, 2008). Given the relationship between technology and leisure activity (Bryce, 2001), it is not uncommon to find staggering evidence of workplace personal electronic communication. The 2004 Workplace E-Mail and IM Survey from the American Management Association (www.amanet.org) and the ePolicy Institute (www.epolicyinstitute.com) reveal that 86% of the respondents use workplace communications for personal activities\(^1\), while empirical finding suggests that 39% of the respondents use IM for personal reasons (Glass & Li, 2010). Unrestricted personal or informal communications, fueling unforeseeable risks, legal liabilities and loss of productivity, can subtly spread through various workplace communication media. To prevent employees from misusing the technology, perhaps a holistic approach is better suited to detect, deter and prevent future negative behaviors (Flynn, 2004). However, asserting stringent guidelines can be challenging and degrading to employee morale.

E-mail, the de facto means of electronic communication, is now the workplace communication norm whether work or non-work related. Motivated to seek novel experience through interpersonal communication, employees can download and install IM client software on their office computers. Some companies have a dedicated IM/SMS or an office communication server that can be accessible via mobile devices from any geographical location—freeing employees from being stationed at any physical location. At the same time, connecting to the Internet through handheld devices can result in a spontaneous communication experience by providing an instant freedom of social interactions.

The freedoms associated with personal electronic communication can benefit employees by reducing stress, relieving boredom, and clarifying task complexity and ambiguity. Research finds that personal electronic communication fosters work-life balance, but prolonged interactions also decrease employee productivity (Mahatanankoon, 2010). Personal electronic communication, an informal communication in the workplace that extends going beyond work-related responsibilities, can encourage employees seeking novel ways to invigorate their work life. Research indicates that when involving personal communication, a variety of motivational factors—attitude, social norms, relationship commitment and critical mass—collectively assert their influence on the behavior intention to use IM (Li, Chau & Van Slyke, 2010; Glass & Li, 2010). This suggests that the freedom of social interactions can extend to other less restricted office communication technologies.

Any existing office communication technologies can satisfy employees’ desired personal objectives. Employees also tend to strategically modify their uses for convenience and efficiency, changing from one type of communication medium to another, e.g., from e-mailing to text messaging or instant messaging. This ever shifting strategy of seeking to accommodate one’s communication needs is related to the interchangeable processes of conveyance and convergence, according to media synchronicity theory (Dennis Fuller, & Valacich, 2008). In the conveyance process, communicating parties exchange significant cognitive processing and information; while in the convergence process, the communicating parties seek to reach a common understanding using sufficient shared information (Dennis et al., 2008).

From the theoretical perspective of media synchronicity theory (MST), asynchronous e-mail is profoundly in the spectrum of the conveyance process—creating a shared understanding among communicating parties; on the other hand, synchronous SMS and IM are typically involved with the processes of convergence—seeking to reach a common agreeable goal, needing less elaboration. Using the understanding of the conveyance and convergence processes offered by MST (Dennis et al., 2008) as a basis, this exploratory study examines the personal electronic communica-
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