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Amber Young
University of Oklahoma, amberyoung@ou.edu

Sheila Miranda
University of Oklahoma, shailamiranda@ou.edu

Jama Denae Summers
University of Oklahoma, jama.summers@ou.edu

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Amber G. Young
University of Oklahoma
amberyoung@ou.edu

Shaila M. Miranda
University of Oklahoma
shailamiranda@ou.edu

Jama D. Summers
University of Oklahoma
jama.summers@ou.edu

ABSTRACT

Emotional labor is an essential component of knowledge work. As knowledge work increasingly moves online, we need to understand emotional labor performed online. Extant emotion research cautions against blindly applying insights about emotional labor from a face-to-face context to an online context. Yet, we know little about emotional labor performed online. We raise the following questions about emotional labor by community moderators: What constitutes "appropriate emotional displays" in online communities? How do community members' emotional displays interact with use of technology features to influence moderators' displays? Our findings suggest that the high-/low-energy dimension of emotion is more salient to the emotional labor performed by community moderators than is the conventionally-studied positive versus negative affect dimension. Findings further reveal the tendency for community members' use of technology features in stylizing their posts to induce mindfulness in moderators' emotional displays in response to those posts.

Keywords

Emotion, Computer-Mediated Communication, Community Participation, Community Moderation

INTRODUCTION

Emotional labor, defined as "the act of expressing organizationally desired emotions during service transactions" (Morris and Feldman 1997: 987), is an essential component of knowledge work (Hochschild 1979). As an increasing amount of knowledge work – from provision of medical services to customer support – moves online, there is an increasing need to understand emotional labor performed online. Extant emotion research indicating disparate effects of emotion in face-to-face and online contexts (e.g., Byron 2008) cautions against blindly applying insights about emotional labor gleaned from a face-to-face context to emotional labor performed online. Yet, there has been little scholarly attention to emotional labor performed in online contexts.

The focus of our investigation is on emotional labor performed by a new category of employee – *online forum moderators*. Moderating online communities is a critical service function, wherein moderators' interventions shape consumers' perceptions of the focal company, its products and brand. Research found effective moderators clarified,

but did not edit; understood participants' needs; put members "at center stage"; showed their human side; and let participants vent (Williams and Cothrel 2000). These tasks require moderators to manifest appropriate emotional displays, i.e., emotional labor.

What constitutes "appropriate emotional displays" in online communities though? And how do community members' own emotional displays interact with their use of technology features to influence moderators' displays? These are the focal questions of this research. To date, MIS research examining effects of emotion on human interactions with technology has been inconclusive or inconsistent with other research, resulting in contradictory managerial implications and critical gaps (Zhang 2013). This may be due, in part, to our tendency to view emotion as simply *positive* or *negative*, when, in fact theories of emotion also distinguish between *high* and *low energy* affect (e.g., Russell 2003). We integrate theories of emotion, emotional contagion, dual processing, and media to model how emotion is socially transferred in a digital environment and the effects of technology features on this process. We test this model with data collected from the Kraft Food Cooking Community, an online brand community. The ostensive purpose of this community is recipe-sharing, but it also enables Kraft customers to air grievances and solicit redress. Moderator participation on the community is therefore extensive, affording a rich opportunity to investigate emotional labor.

Our work makes three key contributions to literature on emotion and CMC. First, we draw attention to the work of community moderators as emotional labor. Second, we highlight the need to consider both positive/negative and high-/low-energy dimensions of emotion displays in emotional labor. Third, we highlight the need to consider how community members' use of technology-based features mitigates the impacts of their linguistic emotional displays on moderators' emotional displays.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Emotion and Emotional Contagion

Emotions are powerful motivators, providing goals and driving both cognitions and actions (Jasper 1998). Emotional expressions often evoke consciously- or unconsciously-mirrored responses from others (Hatfield et al. 1994), a process termed *emotional contagion*. Emotional responses to words differ across communication media though. Individuals adept at

interpreting emotional cues when communicating face-to-face often misinterpret emotional cues in text-based, electronic communication, typically interpreting messages expressing negative emotion as more negative than intended by the author and messages expressing positive emotion as more neutral than intended (Byron 2008).

Inconsistent findings of prior CMC research on emotion may be due to conceptualizing emotion solely as positive or negative, ignoring effects of *emotional energy*, i.e., "the intensity with which emotions are expressed" (Barsade 2002: 649). High levels of emotional energy, whether positive or negative, are believed to correlate with stronger memories (Talarico, LaBar and Rubin 2004), cognitive breadth and variability, and high and low levels of creativity (Amabile, Barsade, Mueller and Staw 2005). Viewing emotion in terms of both valence (positive, negative) and energy (high, low) therefore permits researchers a more complete understanding of emotion and its effects (Russell 2003; Zhang 2013).

Emotional Labor

Emotional labor is "the act of expressing socially desired emotions during service transactions" (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993: 88-89). While increasing customer satisfaction in service encounters, emotional labor imposes considerable stress on the job performer, who must ensure inappropriate displays are not inadvertently "given off" (Goffman 1959), thereby compromising successful performance of the emotional labor.

Media Enrichment through Technology Feature Use

Social presence and media richness theories associate greater availability of cues, both verbal and non-verbal, with communicators' increased ability to send and receive complex social signals. Compared with visual communication such as face-to-face or video conference, text-based communication media are relatively lacking in non-verbal cues, constraining nonverbal emotion signals such as facial expressions or body language (Byron 2008). Text-based CMC therefore attenuates emotional displays (Glikson and Erez 2013). It decreases opportunities for displays that are inadvertently "given off" rather than deliberately "given" (Goffman 1959).

Limitations of text-based communication media notwithstanding, communicators may adapt practices to compensate for a lack of non-verbal cues. Channel expansion theory (Carlson and Zmud 1999) suggests that media experience equips individuals to communicate complex, socio-emotional messages more richly. Because of individuals' ability to adapt media to their communication needs, it is important to consider non-traditional cues for expressing emotion in text-based communication media. Beyond the words themselves, language features provide cues to communicators' emotions and relationships (Carlson et al. 2004). Textual analyses have found new computer-mediated technologies

to result in development of novel linguistic varieties with stylistic, idiosyncratic, and genre-specific language usage (Abassi and Chen 2008). Additionally, nonverbal cues may substitute for those available in face-to-face communication. Even within plain-text media, symbols or punctuation provide emphasis; capitalization conveys emotional intensity (Byron 2008). With slightly richer text-based media, symbols such as emoticons, font size, and color focus the reader's attention and heighten the expression of emotion (Abassi and Chen 2008).

Participation Continuance in Communities

Brand communities are self-perpetuating groups joined by their interest in goods produced by a particular firm (Cova and Pace 2006). Brand community benefits to firms include enhanced consumer loyalty (Thompson and Sinha 2008), positive perceptions of the brand image, and increased brand recommendation (Woisetschläger et al. 2008). Individuals join these communities for a variety of reasons including a desire to communicate with an organization about a grievance. Retention is vital for emotional bonds, shared language and mental models and clearly defined boundaries (Kane et al. 2009).

Dual Processing Theories

According to dual processing theories, cognition occurs via two processes: "System 1" thinking involves instinct, intuition and fast thinking; "System 2" thinking facilitates complex problem solving (Kahneman 2011). Individuals' default is System 1 thinking, transitioning to System 2 only when System 1 thinking cannot adequately process stimuli (Petty et al. 1983).

RESEARCH MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

Moderators' Emotion and Community Continuance

Through emotional contagion, moderators' positive emotion displays will enhance members' positive affect and, consequently, their ongoing participation in the community. Moderators' negative affect *directed at the customer*, e.g., hostility, will increase customers' negative affect (Doucet 2004). Effects of moderators' expressions of negative affect *directed at the target of the customer's dissatisfaction* are less clear, with concepts of empathy and contagion suggesting different outcomes. From an empathy perspective, moderators mirroring customers' negative sentiment may be expected to garner a favorable response from the customer expressing the grievance. From a contagion perspective though, Pugh (2001) found that customers "catch" service employees' affect, suggesting that moderators' expressions of negative affect would only reinforce the customer's negative affect. In general, people tend to seek out mood-enhancing circumstances and avoid circumstances that induce a negative mood, and the mobilization-minimization hypothesis suggests that people would rather put negative events behind them than dwell on the events (Taylor

1991). Further, a moderator's emotional intervention affects responses of not only the original complainant, but also of other community members who view the thread and would prefer to maintain a positive affective state.

Hypothesis 1a: Moderators' displays of positive emotion will increase community continuance.

Hypothesis 1b: Moderators' displays of negative emotion will decrease community continuance.

Emotional energy represents activation, arousal, tension or activity (Russell and Barrett 1999), i.e., a call to action. Consequently, during periods of high emotional energy, individuals experience electrodermal physiological changes (Lang et al 1997) such as sweaty palms, an evolved stress response related to physical actions such as climbing a tree (Pennebaker 1990). Moderators' high energy displays therefore may be viewed as calls-to-action to the community, resulting in its mobilization.

Hypothesis 2: Moderators' displays of high energy emotions will have stronger effects on community continuance than their displays of low energy emotions.

Member Emotion, Feature Use and Moderator Emotion

While System 1 processing will generally facilitate emotional contagion, CMC attenuates signaling of positive emotion (Byron 2008). Because of this neutrality effect, we cannot anticipate moderators' mimicry of community displays of positive emotion. Channel expansion theory suggests that communities socially-construct specific meanings via ways of communicating or use of technology features (Carlson and Zmud 1999)such as font color and size, capitalization, boldface, emoticons, and punctuation. These stylistic cues draw readers' attention to the message, disrupting autonomous message processing, and triggering systematic processing. Community members' feature use therefore will cause moderators to be more attentive to the emotional tone of community members' posts and of their own reaction to that tone. This heightened attentiveness will diminish the neutrality effect of CMC. Moderators are therefore likely to reciprocate community displays of positive emotion.

Hypothesis 3a: When community members *do not use* enhanced CMC features, their positive emotion displays of will *not increase* moderators' positive emotion displays.

Hypothesis 3b: When community members *use* enhanced CMC features, their positive emotion displays will *increase* moderators' positive emotion displays.

With CMC's negativity bias (Byron 2008), moderators are more likely to perceive negative than positive emotion. We therefore should observe higher levels of emotional contagion from community to moderator for negative than for positive emotions. This expectation is

reinforced by the mobilization-minimization hypothesis, which suggests that negative events initially evoke a stronger response than do positive events (Taylor 1991). Individuals exposed to customers who displayed interactional injustice engaged in higher levels of emotional labor and found it more difficult to adhere to emotional display rules, i.e., prescriptions of courtesy and politeness (Rupp and Spencer 2006). Community displays of negative affect are therefore likely to detract from moderators' motivation and ability to adequately perform emotional labor such that moderators "give off" an increased amount of negative emotion. When attentive to their charge to perform emotional labor though, moderators are less likely to mimic members' negative emotion displays. Because members' feature use likely induces such heightened attentiveness, we anticipate lower contagion effects of negative emotion.

Hypothesis 4a: When community members *do not use* enhanced CMC features, their negative emotion displays will *increase* moderators' negative emotion displays.

Hypothesis 4b: When community members *use* enhanced CMC features, their negative emotion displays will *decrease* moderators' negative emotion displays.

METHODS

Data was collected from the Kraft Food Cooking Community. While the community's ostensive purpose is recipe sharing, it also permits customers to air grievances that Kraft employees address. We chose this community because of the systematic moderator interventions in response to customer grievances, enabling us to understand the role of moderator emotion displays.

We developed a data set consisting of 92 moderator interventions across each of 48 community threads through which grievances were aired and addressed. Each transition from community to moderator marked a sub-thread, which is the unit of analysis in this research. Each sub-thread consisted of one or more community member posts, immediately followed by a moderator post.

We counted the number of characters boldfaced, italicized, underlined, and all caps in community posts and the number of different fonts and font colors appearing in each comment. The *feature use* metric was then computed as the total number of characters boldfaced, italicized, underlined, and all caps times the number of fonts times the number of font colors. Note that while community members frequently used such features, moderators typically eschewed such feature use.

We assessed emotional displays using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) software (Pennebaker et al. 2006). We applied the LIWC 2001 dictionary, which separates positive emotion into *positive feeling* and *optimism* and negative emotion into *anxiety*, *anger*, and

sadness. Following Barsade (2002), we then categorized optimism, anxiety, and anger as high-energy emotions and positive feeling and sadness as low energy emotions.

Community continuance was assessed in two ways. The first was the sum of the number of times each participant in a sub-thread continued to post messages to the community. The second was the average number of days from the post date to the last post of each sub-thread participant. Because the metrics were strongly correlated (0.85, p<0.001), we use only the first in analyses.

We implemented two statistical controls. To account for possibility that response delays could influence moderators' emotions and alienate community members, we controlled for the *response delay* in each sub-thread as the difference between the time at which the moderator intervened in a sub-thread and the time of the first posting within that sub-thread. We controlled for the *thread year*, since temporal differences in moderators' scripts could account for systematic variance in moderator emotion and because our community continuance metric was likely to be attenuated in more recent posts.

RESULTS

To minimize multicollinearity in assessment of interaction effects, all independent variables were centered. To account for correlated error terms within conversation threads, our analyses used standard errors clustered within threads. Because continuance data were over-dispersed count data, we used zero-inflated negative binomial regressions to assess hypotheses 1 and 2 (Table 1).

Table 1: Moderator Emotion Effects on Continuance

Moderator Emotion	β(SE)
Positive feeling	-0.71 (0.21)***
Optimism	0.29 (0.08)***
Anxiety	1.15 (0.61)+
Anger	1.09 (0.21)***
Sadness	-1.34 (0.25)***

+p<0.10; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Hypotheses 3 and 4 were assessed using ordinary least squares regressions.   Due to space constraints, only significant interaction effects are reported in Table 2.

Table 2: Feature Use (FU) Interaction Effects

Community Emotion	Effect on Moderator Emotion	At	
		Low FU	High FU
Positive feeling	Optimism	+	++
Optimism	Optimism	0	++
Anxiety	Optimism	--	++
Anxiety	Anxiety	--	++
Anger	Anger	++	--
Sadness	Anger	++	--
Positive feeling	Sadness	--	0
Optimism	Sadness	--	++

0=no effect; +/+++=positive/strong positive effect;
-/---=negative/strong negative effect

DISCUSSION

Findings regarding what constitutes effective emotional displays were insightful.   From Table 1, we see *the activation or energy dimension* of the Russell (2003) circumplex to be *more predictive of community continuance than the positive/negative affect dimension*. Along with optimism, displays of anxiety and anger, all high-energy emotions, *increased* continuance, while expressions of positive feeling and sadness *decreased* community continuance. Further, anger had a stronger positive effect on continuance than even optimism. Earlier, we noted that very positive and very negative emotions are associated with physiological changes such as increased heart rate and startle reflex magnitude (Russell and Barrett 1999), evolutionary responses that prepared individuals for physical action (Pennebaker 1990). The action we anticipated in response to activation of very (high energy) positive emotions was enthusiastic participation in the community, whereas the action we anticipated in response to very (high energy) negative emotions was withdrawal or flight. An alternative to the flight response to a perceived threat is a fight response, where the individual opts to *combat* the threatening stimulus (Canon 1932). Our findings suggest moderators' expressions of anger and anxiety provoked such a fight response from community members.

With regard to emotional contagion effects from community participants to moderators, our findings largely support our premise that *feature use increases moderators' systematic processing of community messages*. We observed this in the enhanced contagion of optimism and dampened contagion of anger at higher levels of community members' feature use.   We also observe this in reduced moderators' negative emotion displays concomitant with members' positive emotion displays at low, but not high, levels of feature use.

Our work makes three key contributions to literature on emotion and CMC. First, we draw attention to online knowledge work, particularly moderation of brand communities, as emotional labor. Second, we highlight the need to consider positive/negative *and* high-/low-energy dimensions of emotion displays in studying emotional labor.   In fact, our findings suggest that moderators' high energy displays are more salient to community continuance than are positive emotion displays. While this insight is relatively novel to both emotion and CMC literatures, research increasingly suggests that we look at emotion in a more granular fashion (e.g., Bodenhausen et al. 1994).   Third, our findings demonstrate that simply highlighting portions of a text – through changes in colors, fonts, boldfacing, underlining, or italicizing – can alter the dynamics of emotional contagion in online communities. By focusing on cues communicated through technology-based enrichments of text in addition to words, this study answers calls for greater focus on the complexities of a CMC environment (Abassi and Chen 2008).

Our research provides insights to firms specifying the critical, evolving role of brand community moderators and to the individuals performing the role. It draws attention to the emotional labor required of employees in these roles and informs those performing the role that high-energy displays – of positive *or* negative emotion – are most effective in sustaining community participation. Findings further suggest that moderators be attentive to their tendency to be more reactive to emotional cues when responding to messages lacking non-verbal cues.

Finally, findings have implications for the design of online communities. Specifically, our findings suggest that designs permitting members to express themselves more richly induce a state of attentiveness in moderators, who then respond more mindfully to community posts.

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