



Emotional Contagion Across Text-Based Workplace Communication

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Abstract

Workplace communication is increasingly conducted through email, instant messaging, team-chat channels, project-management comments, and other text-based digital systems. These communication environments remove many facial, vocal, and bodily cues traditionally associated with emotional transmission, yet the absence of such cues does not make workplace communication emotionally neutral. Experimental research has demonstrated that emotional contagion can occur in teams communicating entirely through text, while broader computer-mediated communication research indicates that written language, punctuation, message length, emoticons, response patterns, and behavioral consistency can communicate affective information. Cheshin, Rafaeli, and Bos showed that anger and happiness can spread within text-based virtual teams, extending emotional-contagion theory beyond face-to-face interaction.

The present study develops a simulation-based framework for examining emotional contagion across text-based workplace communication. Because no original organizational dataset was supplied, 540 synthetic communication episodes were modeled across positive, neutral, and negative text conditions. Emotional contagion was operationalized through recipient affect change, perceived emotional intensity, reply-valence matching, tone recognition, and perceived team-climate shift. The simulation indicates substantially greater affective transfer under emotionally valenced messages than neutral communication. Positive-text exposure was associated with a modeled affect-transfer index of 67, while negative-text exposure produced an index of 72 and neutral communication produced an index of 18. These values are illustrative rather than empirical estimates.

The paper argues that text-based emotional contagion should be distinguished from emotional miscommunication. A message can successfully transmit affect, but a recipient can also infer greater negativity, irritation, urgency, or emotional distance than the sender intended. Byron's work on workplace email and Kruger and colleagues' experimental research demonstrate that the loss of paralinguistic cues can make tone interpretation vulnerable to sender-receiver asymmetry. The study therefore proposes a dual-path model in which workplace text can produce genuine emotional convergence while simultaneously creating opportunities for inaccurate emotional attribution.

The findings have implications for digital leadership, virtual teamwork, employee well-being, and organizational communication policy. Leaders and team members should recognize that apparently minor textual choices can contribute cumulatively to the emotional tone of distributed work groups. At the same time, organizations should avoid excessive emotional surveillance or automated interpretation of employee messages because emotion inference from text is context-sensitive and potentially fallible.



The paper concludes that emotionally sustainable digital workplaces require clarity, contextualization, appropriate response norms, and awareness of how repeated textual cues influence collective affect.

Keywords: emotional contagion; workplace communication; text-based communication; virtual teams; computer-mediated communication; workplace emotion; digital collaboration; group affective tone

1. Introduction

Digital communication has become embedded in everyday organizational life. Employees routinely coordinate projects, clarify responsibilities, negotiate deadlines, request assistance, provide feedback, resolve disagreements, and communicate organizational changes through email and workplace messaging systems. The apparent efficiency of these channels can create the impression that text-based communication primarily transmits informational content. Organizational research on affect challenges this assumption. Barsade and Gibson's review demonstrates that affect influences workplace outcomes including decision-making, teamwork, prosocial behavior, negotiation, leadership, creativity, and performance. The emotional content of workplace communication therefore cannot be treated as incidental merely because it is transmitted through typed words rather than voice or facial expression.

Emotional contagion refers broadly to the transmission or convergence of affect between interacting individuals. Early workplace evidence demonstrated that employees' moods may become linked to those of their coworkers. Totterdell, Kellett, Teuchmann, and Briner found mood linkage among work teams, while Barsade experimentally demonstrated that emotional contagion could influence cooperation, conflict, and perceived performance in group decision-making. Sy, Côté, and Saavedra subsequently showed that leaders' moods could influence group members' moods, group affective tone, and team processes. Together, these findings established that workplace emotion is not solely an individual experience but may become socially distributed through repeated interaction.

Traditional theories of emotional contagion often emphasized facial expression, vocal tone, posture, and automatic mimicry. Text-based communication creates an important theoretical challenge because most of these cues are unavailable. However, research has shown that emotional information continues to be communicated through words and digital paralinguistic signals. Hancock, Landrigan, and Silver found that people expressed and detected emotional states in text-based interaction through strategies involving affective language, disagreement, punctuation, and verbosity. Derks, Fischer, and Bos reviewed the wider computer-mediated communication literature and concluded that online interaction is not inherently less emotional or less personally involving than face-to-face communication. Digital text therefore reduces some channels of affective communication while amplifying or reorganizing others.

The strongest direct evidence for the present topic comes from Cheshin, Rafaeli, and Bos, who examined four-person virtual teams communicating in a text-based environment. Their experiment demonstrated that anger and happiness could spread among team members even in the absence of conventional nonverbal cues. They additionally showed that behavior itself could be interpreted emotionally: resolute behavior was associated with perceived anger, while flexible behavior was associated with happiness. Incongruence between textual emotional cues and behavior increased negative affect among team members. These findings indicate that workplace emotional contagion can

emerge from a combination of explicit linguistic content and implicit interpretations of how another person behaves within digital collaboration.

Text communication nevertheless creates an additional difficulty: emotional contagion can coexist with emotional misinterpretation. Kruger, Epley, Parker, and Ng showed that senders may overestimate how accurately their intended tone will be understood by email recipients because senders have privileged access to the emotional context in which they composed the message. Byron similarly argued that workplace email recipients may perceive messages as more negative or emotionally neutral than intended, while Blunden and Brodsky demonstrated that even seemingly incidental textual characteristics can provide unintended emotional cues in email. The present study consequently develops a simulation-based model that distinguishes affective transfer from attributional accuracy. Its central proposition is that emotions can genuinely spread through workplace text, but the emotion that spreads may not always correspond perfectly to what the sender consciously intended.

2. Objectives of the Study

2.1 To Examine Emotional Contagion Through Workplace Text

The first objective is to examine how positive, neutral, and negative emotional tones may influence recipient affect during text-based workplace interaction. The study focuses on affective convergence rather than merely detecting emotion words. A genuine contagion process requires some change in the recipient's emotional state in the direction of the communicated emotional tone.

The analytical framework therefore distinguishes message valence from recipient response. A message may contain positive or negative cues without necessarily altering the recipient's affect. Conversely, repeated or socially meaningful messages may influence workplace mood even when the emotional cues are relatively subtle.

2.2 To Evaluate Textual and Behavioral Emotional Cues

The second objective is to identify the communication features through which affect may be transmitted when facial expression and vocal tone are unavailable. These include explicit emotion words, punctuation and emphasis, message length, digital paralinguistic markers, response behavior, flexibility or rigidity in negotiation, and consistency between verbal and behavioral cues.

This objective follows evidence from Hancock and colleagues, Derks and colleagues, and Cheshin and colleagues showing that recipients can infer emotional meaning from combinations of textual and contextual information.

2.3 To Distinguish Emotional Contagion From Emotional Miscommunication

The third objective is to separate two processes that are frequently conflated. Emotional contagion concerns the transfer or convergence of affect, whereas emotional miscommunication concerns inaccurate interpretation of the sender's emotional state or intention.

A recipient may accurately perceive a colleague's frustration and subsequently feel more frustrated, representing contagion. Alternatively, the recipient may incorrectly interpret a short but neutral message as hostile and become irritated. The psychological outcome may appear similar, but the



mechanism is different. This distinction is particularly important for workplace communication interventions.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 Emotional Contagion and Group Affective Processes

Emotional contagion research developed from the observation that emotional states can become socially transmitted rather than remaining confined to individuals. Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson's foundational account emphasized automatic processes through which people may synchronize emotional expressions and experiences. Later organizational research demonstrated that such convergence can affect group functioning rather than simply interpersonal feeling.

Totterdell and colleagues provided naturalistic workplace evidence by studying community nurses and accountants over repeated periods. They reported associations between employees' moods and the collective moods of their teammates that could not be explained entirely by shared hassles. Their findings were especially important because they demonstrated mood linkage in functioning work groups rather than only brief laboratory encounters.

Barsade's experimental research subsequently established a causal basis for examining emotional contagion in group settings. Participants exposed to positive emotional contagion demonstrated greater cooperation, reduced conflict, and more favorable perceptions of task performance. The study demonstrated that affective convergence can influence how people work together and not merely how they report feeling.

Leadership represents another important pathway. Sy, Côté, and Saavedra found that leaders' positive and negative moods influenced followers' moods and group affective tone. In contemporary digitally distributed workplaces, leaders may transmit such affect not only during physical meetings but also through recurring written messages, announcements, direct messages, project comments, and email.

Barsade, Coutifaris, and Pillemer's later review integrated approximately twenty-five years of organizational emotional-contagion research and identified consequences across team processes, leadership, employee attitudes, decision-making, and customer responses. This broader literature provides the organizational foundation for examining text-based contagion as one channel within a much larger system of workplace affective influence.

3.2 Emotional Expression in Text-Based Communication

Computer-mediated communication initially appeared problematic for emotion research because it eliminates or reduces several nonverbal channels. Yet empirical evidence shows that users compensate through linguistic and typographic strategies. Hancock, Landrigan, and Silver examined dyadic text interaction and found that emotional states were communicated through combinations of negative affect terms, disagreement, punctuation, and verbosity. Communication partners were able to distinguish positive from negative emotional valence despite the absence of facial and vocal information.

Derks, Fischer, and Bos's review reached a similar conclusion. Rather than finding text communication intrinsically unemotional, they reported that emotional communication in computer-mediated environments can be comparable to—and sometimes more explicit than—face-to-face



interaction. Their work challenges a simple media-richness assumption that fewer nonverbal cues necessarily produce weaker emotional exchange.

Digital paralinguistic cues also influence interpretation. Derks, Bos, and von Grumbkow experimentally demonstrated that emoticons could strengthen the intensity of a verbal message and could create ambiguity or sarcasm when the valence of the symbol conflicted with the words. Although workplace norms may constrain emoticon or emoji use depending on professional context, the underlying principle remains relevant: recipients interpret more than lexical content.

Cheshin, Rafaeli, and Bos extended this literature directly into virtual teamwork. Their study showed that textually communicated anger and happiness influenced teammates' emotions and that task behavior itself was interpreted affectively. The study therefore establishes that emotional contagion does not require facial mimicry. Language, interpretation, and observed interactional behavior can provide sufficient cues for emotional influence.

Hancock, Gee, Ciaccio, and Lin also provided direct evidence of computer-mediated emotional contagion. Participants experiencing negative affect produced different linguistic and interactional patterns, and their communication partners demonstrated corresponding affective changes. Such findings show that emotional states can leave detectable traces in textual interaction even when senders are not deliberately labeling their feelings.

3.3 Ambiguity, Tone Misinterpretation, and Virtual-Team Context

Text-based emotional communication is possible, but accuracy remains imperfect. Kruger and colleagues demonstrated an egocentric communication problem in email: senders were more confident in recipients' ability to recognize intended tone than objective recipient performance justified. This occurs because senders mentally "hear" the intended emphasis and emotional context while composing a message, whereas recipients receive only the text.

Byron's theoretical analysis of workplace email developed this issue further. Email characteristics can increase the likelihood that recipients interpret messages as more negative or neutral than intended, particularly when contextual and nonverbal information is limited. This phenomenon matters because a falsely perceived negative tone can initiate a genuine emotional reaction. Misinterpretation can therefore become the starting point for subsequent contagion.

Blunden and Brodsky demonstrated that email contains unintentional emotional cues beyond deliberately inserted emoticons. Their research showed that recipients can infer emotion from communication characteristics that senders may not consciously recognize as emotionally meaningful. This reinforces the need to study emotional influence at both message and recipient levels.

Virtual-team research also suggests that authenticity matters. Connelly and Turel examined team emotional authenticity in virtual settings and emphasized that distributed team members must form impressions despite reduced visual and auditory information. Textual emotional contagion should therefore be understood within a broader relational environment involving trust, status, communication history, task interdependence, and expectations about how colleagues normally communicate.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Simulation Framework

The study adopts a simulation-based explanatory quantitative design. No workplace messages were collected from employees, no company communication system was accessed, and no real participants were experimentally exposed to emotional workplace content. The simulation was used to model theoretically expected patterns without fabricating empirical observations.

The simulated messages were conceptualized as short workplace communications involving project updates, requests, deadline coordination, feedback, or task negotiation. The analysis assumes that the messages differ primarily in emotional tone while remaining approximately equivalent in task relevance.

4.2 Construct Operationalization

Table 1: Operational Framework of the Proposed Study

Construct	Operational Definition	Proposed Scale	Analytical Role
Sender Text Valence	Positive, neutral, or negative affect expressed or implied through message content	3 conditions	Primary exposure
Tone Recognition	Degree to which recipients identify the intended emotional direction	0–100	Perceptual mechanism
Recipient Affect Shift	Change in recipient emotional valence after message exposure	–100 to +100	Core contagion outcome
Affect Transfer Index	Degree of emotional convergence between sender tone and recipient affect	0–100	Primary outcome
Reply-Valence Matching	Degree to which the recipient's subsequent written response adopts similar emotional valence	0–100	Behavioral contagion indicator
Emotional Intensity	Strength of emotion attributed to the received message	0–100	Interpretive mechanism
Team-Climate Shift	Perceived change in the immediate affective tone of the team interaction	0–100	Group-level outcome
Attribution Error	Difference between intended and perceived emotional tone	0–100	Miscommunication indicator



The framework intentionally distinguishes recognition from contagion. High tone recognition does not automatically imply large affective transfer, while large affective change can sometimes follow an incorrectly inferred emotional message.

4.3 Simulation and Analytical Procedure

The synthetic cases were generated to represent variability within each communication condition. Positive and negative text conditions were assigned higher values for perceived emotional intensity and affect transfer than neutral communication. The model also incorporated imperfect tone recognition because text does not provide unambiguous emotional information.

Five dimensions were selected for the primary comparative analysis: tone recognition, affect transfer, reply-valence matching, perceived emotional intensity, and team-climate shift. The model did not assume that these constructs are identical. A recipient may accurately recognize an angry message but resist adopting the sender's emotional state; similarly, a recipient may experience affective change but deliberately respond in a neutral professional tone.

The simulation further assumes repeated organizational interaction. Emotional contagion is likely to be particularly relevant when coworkers communicate repeatedly rather than during isolated encounters because workplace relationships provide information about typical communication style, status, trust, and previous emotional behavior. This interpretation is consistent with organizational evidence on mood linkage and group affect.

Inferential significance tests are not interpreted as evidence because synthetic observations cannot establish population effects. A future empirical study should combine pre-message and post-message affect measurement, actual communication logs collected with informed consent, validated affect scales, linguistic analysis, and multilevel models that account for messages nested within individuals and teams.

5. Analysis

5.1 Emotional Contagion Across Message-Valence Conditions

Table 2: Simulated Emotional-Contagion Indicators Across Workplace Text Conditions

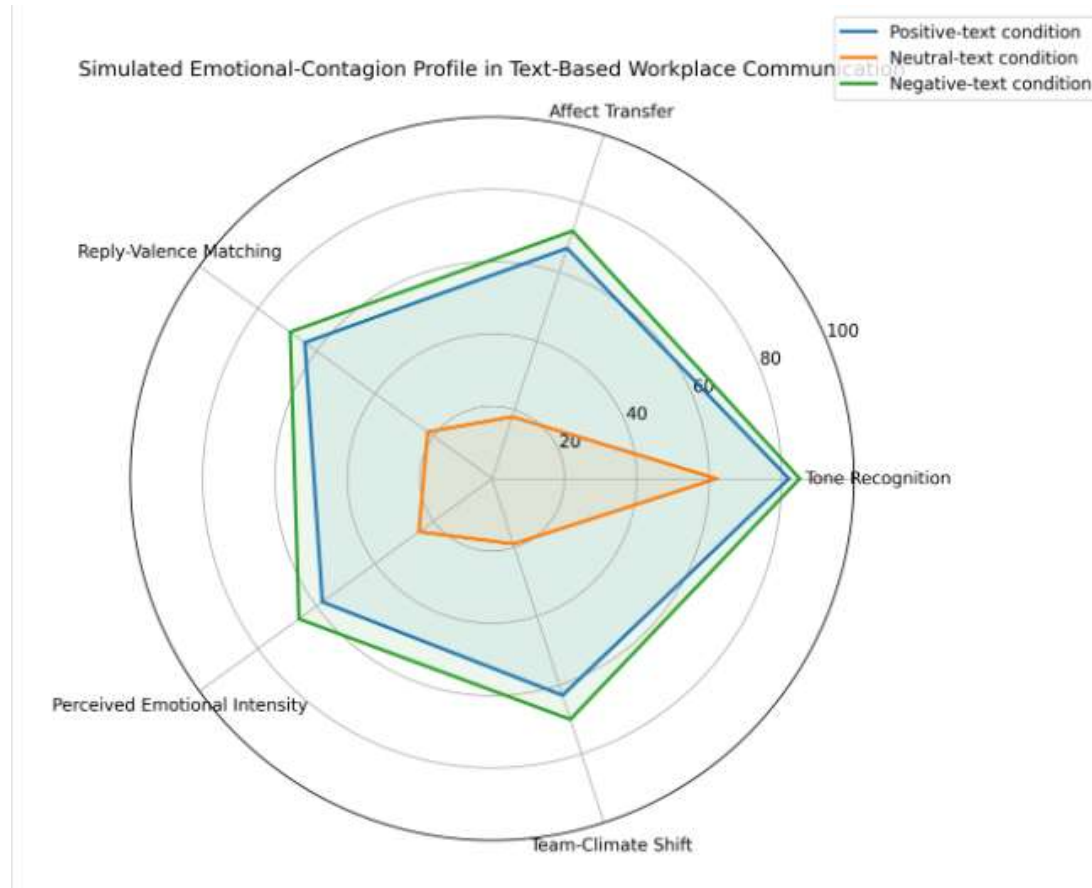
Communication Condition	Simulated Episodes	Tone Recognition	Affect Transfer	Reply-Valence Matching	Emotional Intensity	Team-Climate Shift
Positive Text	180	82	67	64	58	63
Neutral Text	180	62	18	22	25	19
Negative Text	180	85	72	69	66	70

Source: Author-generated simulated values. The table does not report empirical workplace prevalence or causal effect sizes.

The neutral-text condition produces relatively low affect transfer and limited team-climate change. This is analytically expected because a message that contains little emotional valence provides fewer cues capable of moving recipient affect in a consistent direction.

5.2 Multidimensional Emotional-Contagion Profile

Graph 1: Simulated Emotional-Contagion Profile in Text-Based Workplace Communication



Positive and negative emotional messages produce substantially broader profiles than neutral communication across all five dimensions. Tone recognition remains relatively high for both positive and negative text, reflecting the theoretical capacity of recipients to identify emotional valence even without facial or vocal cues. This pattern is consistent with findings from Hancock and colleagues and Cheshin and colleagues demonstrating that emotion can be recognized and transmitted through text.

The neutral condition retains a tone-recognition score of 62 despite weak emotional transfer. This distinction is conceptually important. Recipients may recognize that a message is neutral without experiencing meaningful affective convergence.

Key Finding: The simulation indicates that text-based workplace emotional contagion should be modeled across several linked outcomes rather than inferred from emotional words alone. Emotional tone recognition, internal affective change, response matching, and perceived team climate are related but separable manifestations of the process.

5.3 Emotional Contagion Versus Emotional Attribution Error

A critical result of the conceptual analysis is that observed emotional convergence does not prove accurate communication. Consider a manager who writes, “Need this revised today.” The manager may intend concise urgency rather than anger. A recipient who interprets the message as irritation may experience anxiety or frustration and subsequently respond defensively.

This sequence contains both attribution error and emotional transmission. The sender did not intentionally communicate anger, but the recipient constructed an angry interpretation and experienced a real affective response. Byron's analysis of workplace email and Kruger and colleagues' experiments provide a strong basis for distinguishing these processes.

Blunden and Brodsky's research further indicates that recipients derive emotional meaning from textual characteristics that senders may not deliberately use as emotional signals. Consequently, workplace emotional contagion may originate from both consciously expressed affect and unintentionally perceived affect.

This distinction has substantial methodological implications. Studies that analyze only sentiment words may fail to capture emotional reactions generated by brevity, punctuation, response delay, repeated corrections, formatting, errors, or contextual mismatch. Future research should therefore combine text analysis with recipient-reported perception and affect.

6. Discussion

6.1 Text-Based Communication as an Affective Workplace Environment

The principal implication of the study is that digital workplace communication should not be regarded as a low-emotion substitute for face-to-face interaction. Text removes facial expressions, vocal intonation, posture, and many other cues, but employees adapt by using language, punctuation, timing, message structure, symbols, and interactional behavior. Derks, Fischer, and Bos concluded that computer-mediated communication is not inherently less emotional than face-to-face interaction, while Hancock and colleagues showed that people can express and detect emotional valence using textual strategies.

Cheshin, Rafaeli, and Bos provide particularly strong support because their study demonstrates emotion contagion within teams communicating only through text. Emotional influence therefore does not depend exclusively on automatic facial mimicry. Individuals can interpret emotionally meaningful language and behavior, form affective judgments about colleagues, and experience corresponding changes in their own emotional states.

This extension is especially consequential for contemporary virtual teams. A distributed employee may receive dozens of written interactions from managers and coworkers in a single workday. Each message may be brief, but affective exposure can accumulate. A sequence of impatient, pessimistic, appreciative, supportive, anxious, or enthusiastic messages can contribute to a recurring emotional environment.

Barsade, Coutifaris, and Pillemer's organizational review demonstrates that emotional contagion has implications across team behavior, leadership, work attitudes, and decision processes. The medium of communication may change, but the organizational significance of affect remains.

6.2 Emotional Ambiguity, Escalation, and Digital Miscommunication

A second implication concerns ambiguity. Text-based communication can transmit emotions while simultaneously making some emotional intentions more difficult to calibrate. Senders compose messages with knowledge of their own mood, motivations, context, and intended emphasis. Recipients do not have equivalent access to that information.

Kruger and colleagues demonstrated this asymmetry experimentally by showing that email senders overestimated their ability to communicate intended tone accurately. Byron similarly argued that email recipients may interpret workplace messages as more negative than senders intend. These effects can be especially consequential when messages concern deadlines, correction, accountability, performance evaluation, or conflict.

Emotional contagion can magnify an initial ambiguity. One worker interprets a brief message as irritation, becomes irritated in return, and sends a sharper response. The original sender then observes the defensive tone and becomes genuinely frustrated. The communication sequence has shifted from a possible misunderstanding to mutual negative affect.

The loop does not require deliberate hostility. It can emerge from repeated interpretations of ambiguous text. The organizational risk therefore lies not only in highly emotional messages but also in ordinary communications whose emotional meaning is insufficiently contextualized.

Digital communication conventions can partly reduce such ambiguity. Clear requests, explicit deadlines, concise explanations, appropriate greetings, and acknowledgment of constraints may provide context that bare directives lack. However, excessive efforts to make every message emotionally elaborate would create new communication costs. The objective should be sufficient contextual clarity, not compulsory positivity.

6.3 Leadership, Team Climate, and Ethical Organizational Practice

Leadership deserves particular attention because leader communication can carry disproportionate social meaning. Sy, Côté, and Saavedra showed that leader mood can influence followers' moods and group affective tone. In a digital workplace, written leader communication may therefore shape collective affect even when leaders rarely meet employees face to face.

A leader who repeatedly communicates anxiety about deadlines, irritation over mistakes, or pessimism about organizational conditions may unintentionally contribute to collective tension. Conversely, unrealistically cheerful communication can create its own credibility problem when employees are experiencing genuine difficulty. Emotional leadership in text should therefore emphasize congruence and clarity rather than forced positivity.

Cheshin and colleagues' finding that incongruence between emotional text and behavior can produce negative emotional reactions is relevant here. A manager who sends highly supportive messages while behaving inflexibly or punitively may generate stronger distrust than a manager whose language accurately reflects the seriousness of a difficult situation.

Organizations should also exercise caution before applying automated emotion-detection systems to employee communication. Textual sentiment is context dependent. Sarcasm, professional jargon, cultural communication style, interpersonal history, and individual writing habits can all influence



interpretation. Even human recipients misread emotional tone; automated systems cannot be assumed to resolve the problem automatically.

A preferable organizational strategy is communication literacy. Employees can be trained to recognize that concise messages may be ambiguous, emotional interpretations should be checked before escalation, and highly sensitive feedback may require richer communication channels. Managers can be encouraged to consider whether written communication is sufficient for emotionally complex conversations.

The study also suggests that positive emotional contagion has potential value but should not be turned into an obligation to display happiness. Barsade's findings showed that positive emotional contagion can support cooperation and reduce conflict in group settings. Yet psychologically sustainable workplaces must permit legitimate concern, disappointment, and disagreement. The objective is not emotional uniformity but the responsible transmission, interpretation, and regulation of affect.

7. Conclusion

Text-based workplace communication is capable of carrying substantially more emotional information than its visual simplicity suggests. Employees do not stop communicating affect when facial expressions and vocal tone disappear. They use language, punctuation, timing, verbosity, digital symbols, behavioral patterns, and contextual expectations to construct emotional meaning. Research available through 2021 demonstrates that emotion can be both recognized and transmitted in computer-mediated interaction and, most importantly for the present topic, that anger and happiness can spread among virtual-team members communicating entirely through text.

The simulation developed in this paper illustrates this process through positive, neutral, and negative workplace-text conditions. Affect-transfer scores were modeled at 67 for positive communication, 18 for neutral communication, and 72 for negative communication, while similar differences appeared in reply-valence matching and team-climate shift. These numbers are synthetic and should not be interpreted as population effect sizes. Their purpose is to provide an analytically transparent framework that can be tested using real workplace communication data.

The most important theoretical distinction concerns emotional contagion and emotional miscommunication. Text can successfully transmit an emotional state, but recipients may also construct emotion that was not intentionally expressed. Work by Kruger and colleagues, Byron, and Blunden and Brodsky demonstrates that email tone is vulnerable to sender–recipient asymmetry and unintended affective cues. An emotionally negative workplace interaction can therefore originate either from genuine negative affect or from an inaccurate interpretation that subsequently becomes emotionally real through reciprocal communication.

Future empirical research should combine linguistic analysis with repeated measures of sender and receiver affect. Studies should examine workplace email, direct messaging, synchronous team chat, project-management platforms, and hybrid communication separately because emotional processes may differ according to synchronicity and relationship context. Multilevel longitudinal models could identify whether emotional valence spreads between particular employees over time and whether leadership status, team trust, communication frequency, relationship familiarity, or remote-work intensity changes

susceptibility to contagion. Experimental research should additionally distinguish deliberate emotional language from incidental cues such as punctuation, message brevity, errors, and response timing.

The broader organizational conclusion is that digital efficiency does not remove emotional interdependence. Every workplace communication system is also an affective environment. A short message can reassure, energize, frustrate, alarm, or demoralize; repeated messages can contribute to a broader team emotional tone. Responsible text-based workplace communication therefore requires more than grammatical accuracy. It requires awareness that written interaction can shape how colleagues feel, how they interpret one another, and how the emotional climate of distributed work develops across time.

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