



## Emotional display behavior in different forms of Computer Mediated Communication



Daejoong Kim<sup>a,1</sup>, Mark G. Frank<sup>b,2</sup>, Sung Tae Kim<sup>a,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Media & Communication, Korea University, 145 Anam-Ro, Seongbuk-Gu 136-701, South Korea

<sup>b</sup> Department of Communication, University at Buffalo, The State University of New York, Buffalo, NY 14260, United States

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### ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of the current study is to explore whether emotional-display behavior varies on different forms of CMC in a context of one-to-one online chat. Eighty college students (40 males and 40 females) participated in this experiment, and participants were randomly and equally assigned to one of the four different chat conditions (i.e., joint-view, no-view, view-in, and view-out), manipulating visibility (whether or not participants could see their chat partner) and monitorability (whether or not participants could be monitored by their chat partner). In an assigned chat condition, participants were asked to read, consecutively, two different emotional (happy and disgusting) stories typed by their chat partner. The emotional behavior participants displayed while reading the emotional stories was measured by self-reports and a facial-action coding system. Results reveal (1) no main effects for visibility and monitorability on the degree of social presence; (2) significant differences in the use of emotion-management techniques in response to happy and disgust emotions, respectively; and (3) less likelihood of a facial expression of disgust in the monitored conditions than in the unmonitored conditions. The results indicate that there are some differences between text-based chat and video-based chat in terms of emotional-display behavior. These findings make meaningful contributions to the ongoing debate regarding communication behavior in CMC.

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### Introduction

CMC has become a pervasive form for everyday individual interactions (Baltes, Dickson, Sherman, Bauer, & LaGanke, 2002; Hinds & Bailey, 2003; Putnam, 2001). During the last two decades, there has been a marked rise in a variety of CMC channels, such as email, short-messaging services (SMS), and instant messaging (IM). Recently, synchronized chat services, such as AIM, Google, or Skype, have also been increasingly used to keep in touch with others in different locations and in real time. More important, the recent increase in the use of webcam-based video chat provides the ability to exchange the nonverbal and contextual cues that are lost in text-based chat, allowing a computer or even a smartphone to act as a videophone or videoconference station.

The penetration of video-based communication technology has raised intriguing questions concerning the differences in media attributes between Video-Based CMC (VCMC) and Text-Based CMC (TCMC) and its resultant effects on communication behavior, as well

as how both of these differ from FTF communication. It could be assumed that, since VCMC enables users to view each other and thus exchange nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, body gestures, eye behaviors, and contextual cues, the differences between VCMC and TCMC would be significant. One could also argue the opposite: little to no difference exists between the two communication modes because TCMC enables users to convey nonverbal cues in other ways, such as by the use of textual paralinguistic cues (i.e., emoticons exclamations, capitalization, and abbreviations).

In addition to the capability of conveying nonverbal cues, another possible marker discriminating VCMC from TCMC is the fact that the lack of visual channels in TCMC prevents the sense of being monitored by a conversation partner involved in a one-to-one communication, both of which are available in VCMC and FTF. In FTF settings, mutual monitoring occurs between interactants, and thus individuals' communication behaviors are subject to the social norms of emotional display, which determine how to express or suppress emotions appropriately. This is not the case in TCMC settings, where mutual monitoring does not happen. However, this is the case in VCMC where mutual monitoring is allowed, as occurs in FTF.

A number of experimental studies (Ekman & Friesen, 1969; Evers, Fischer, Mosquera, & Manstead, 2005; Fridlund, 1991; Kleck

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +82 2 3290 2262.

E-mail addresses: [daejoong@gmail.com](mailto:daejoong@gmail.com) (D. Kim), [mfrank83@buffalo.edu](mailto:mfrank83@buffalo.edu) (M.G. Frank), [sutkim@korea.ac.kr](mailto:sutkim@korea.ac.kr) (S.T. Kim).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +82 10 8597 8624.

<sup>2</sup> Tel.: +1 716 645 1170.

et al., 1976) on emotional display behavior in FTF settings have consistently shown that individuals' communication behavior differs depending on whether people are alone or in the presence of others. Individuals are prone to control their emotional display behavior more often in the presence of others than when alone. In a similar sense, it can be suggested that VCMC may be different from TCMC in terms of the social norms or rules for behavior they elicit. In particular, the nature of VCMC, with its proposed ability to recruit the emotional display behavior that is governed by social and cultural norms, and common to FTF, might be a key factor that distinguishes VCMC from TCMC.

The primary purpose of this study is to explore the media attributes of VCMC and TCMC and determine the differences between VCMC and TCMC in nonverbal communication behaviors in a synchronized one-to-one chat. The particular focus is on how awareness and non-awareness of the other person, in the sense of being monitored by the chat partner, affects emotional display behavior. The results of this study will make meaningful contribution to the ongoing debate regarding communication behavior in difference forms of CMC.

## Literature review

### *Social presence theory*

Social presence theory (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) has been broadly used to evaluate communication media attributes in terms of the degree of social presence. Short, Williams, and Christie initially defined social presence as the degree of salience of the other person in the interactions and consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships. Later, the concept of social presence was developed as the sense of being with others (Heeter, 1992), the degree of awareness of the copresence of the other person (Biocca & Nowak, 2001), or the feeling that one has some level of access or insight into the other's intentional, cognitive, or affective states (Biocca & Nowak, 2001).

Social presence is associated with two social and psychological dimensions: *intimacy* and *immediacy* (Short et al., 1976). While intimacy refers to "the process of reciprocal self-confirmation and the affective tone of the relationship" (Choi, Miracle, & Biocca, 2001, p. 20), immediacy indicates the psychological distance or closeness between interactants (Mehrabian, 1981). The level of intimacy is expressed by verbal behavior and nonverbal behavior (i.e., facial expressions, eye behaviors, or body gestures) and is subconsciously maintained in equilibrium at an appropriate level between interactants (Argyle & Dean, 1965; Mehrabian, 1981). The immediacy is determined by the capacity of the medium in transmitting information associated with verbal and nonverbal cues between interactants. Immediacy cues also include nonverbal behaviors (i.e., physical proximity, body orientation, eye contact, or facial expressions) that increase sensory stimulation and simultaneously decrease psychological distance between the interactants (Burgoon, Buller, & Woodall, 1989; Patterson, 1983). As such, literature on social presence suggests that nonverbal cues play a critical role in determining the degree of both intimacy and immediacy.

Meanwhile social presence as the degree of awareness of copresence with the other person (Biocca & Nowak, 2001) will likely change the salience of social norms. Biocca and Nowak suggested that the higher the social presence is, the more salient the social norm in a given medium. Thus, FTF is strongly constrained by social norms because a conversation partner's information is identifiable, whereas CMC is characterized by the relative absence of social norms (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Short et al., 1976). This implies that along with the availability of nonverbal cues, the awareness or non-awareness of the other person affects the degree

of social presence and it subsequently influences communication behavior in CMC.

### *Social information processing theory*

Social presence theory is limited in that it cannot represent all of the social nature of CMC. For example, social presence theory cannot provide a theoretical framework in accounting for the fact that CMC users have developed ways within the technological confines of CMC to overcome its limited capacity of conveying nonverbal cues. Indeed, a number of studies (Lee, 2003; Utz, 2000; Walther, 1992; Wolf, 2000) found that individuals who were involved in TCMC used shared jargons and conventionalized expressions and other linguistic or nonlinguistic forms, such as emoticons and abbreviations, to deliver their emotional states and moods to their conversational partners.

In this regard, social information processing theory (Walther, 1992, 1996; Walther & Burgoon, 1992) proposes that, despite the lack of nonverbal cues inherent in TCMC, "individuals can find other ways to render the same connotation through word content, style, frequency and length of messages, and other CMC-based behavior" (Walther, 2008, p. 397). In other words, individuals could develop linguistic cues that serve as substitutes of nonverbal cues, share the connotations of the linguistic cues over time, and eventually interpret them identically within a given meaning system. Under this proposition, the social information processing theory claims that CMC can convey affective and emotional information and relational communication despite the reduced availability of nonverbal cues.

In the context of social information processing theory, studies examined the use of textual paralinguistic cues in CMC. In an extensive online language, Crystal (2001) reported that textual paralinguistic cues, such as repeated letters, repeated punctuation marks, all capital letters, and letter spacing and emphasis using asterisks were used as substitutions for nonverbal cues. Another study (Fox, Bukatko, Hallahan, & Crawford, 2007) investigated the use of paralinguistic cues in IM conversations and found that exclamation marks, italics, and repeated letters were used as paralinguistic cues to substitute for nonverbal cues. Typographical symbols (conventionally called emoticons) that resemble facial expressions (Walther & D'Addario, 2001) are also widely used in TCMC to supplement text messages and to help accentuate or emphasize a tone or meaning of the messages (Crystal, 2001; Rezaabek & Cochenour, 1998).

### *Copresence and emotional display rules*

One of the important markers distinguishing VCMC from TCMC may be the presence or absence of copresence. Goffman (1963) first conceptualized the notion of *copresence* and defined it as "a form of human colocation in which individuals become accessible, available, and subject to another" (p. 22). The notion of copresence is somewhat differently understood within various strands of academia. In the communication context, copresence refers to a condition in which instant two-way human interactions or communication can take place in real time (Biocca & Nowak, 2001; Heeter, 1992). In the psychology context, the notion of copresence refers to physical copresence, including a situation that occurs whenever there are mutual monitoring possibilities (Ekman & Friesen, 1969; Evers et al., 2005; Fridlund, 1991; Kleck et al., 1976). This is a broader interpretation, based on awareness of another, but not necessarily on direct communication with the other. When an interaction does occur, however, the interactants monitor each other's behaviors, interpret them, and then formulate their adequate behaviors. During this process, appropriate emotional display behavior is determined based on social norms or cultures in a given society.

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