Is there more to email negotiation than email? The role of email affinity

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ABSTRACT

Email has profoundly influenced the way we communicate personally and professionally and, for many, email negotiations have become a common, every day experience. While many studies have investigated email negotiations by relying on and discussing the characteristics of the medium, this paper focuses on the user's attitude toward the medium and its respective influence on email negotiation. Specifically, we investigate which dimensions make up negotiators' attitude toward email, i.e. their email affinity, and how these attitudes, in turn, influence the negotiation outcomes. In our scale development, three facets of email affinity are theoretically considered, empirically explored and validated: email preference, email comfort and email clarity. Our negotiation study contains a quasi-experimental email negotiation exercise where subjects were paired according to their email affinity. Email comfort emerged as a significant predictor of individual profit, joint gain, and different dimensions of subjective value. Theoretical implications and further research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Computer technology and networks have profoundly influenced the way we communicate today (e.g. Birnholtz, Dixon, & Hancock, 2012). One of the most important changes over the past twenty years has been the advent of email and its pervasive use in the professional (Phillips & Reddie, 2007) and the private sphere (Utz, 2007) for all sorts of communicative tasks. In an increasingly globalized world email transcends time zones and cultures (Rosette, Brett, Barsness, & Lytle, 2012) and facilitates intra- and inter-firm communication in many regards. One key communicative task to advance professional or private goals is negotiation, defined as "a process by which two or more parties attempt to resolve their opposing interests." (Lewicki, Barry, & Saunders, 2010, p. 6). Today, the exigencies of a globalized economy paired with the rising cost of international travel and individual workers' time constraints have made email negotiation a necessity for many (Rosette et al., 2012).

The growing number of empirical investigations on the role and consequences of the communication medium in negotiation reflects the increasing importance of email in daily life. Compared with face-to-face (FTF) negotiation, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has been related with less trust, less interest in future negotiations, less likelihood of achieving collaborative solutions, less persuasion effectiveness, and greater difficulty in building rapport (e.g., Moore, Kurtzberg, Thompson, & Morris, 1999; Morris,

Nadler, Kurtzberg, & Thompson, 2002; Naquin & Paulson, 2003; Wilson, 2003). However, empirical research has been equivocal with regard to negotiation outcomes: In some studies, CMC negotiation led to better and more equitable economic outcomes than FTF (e.g. Citera, Beauregard, & Mitsuya, 2005; Croson, 1999), in others no differences were found (Galin, Gross, & Gosalker, 2007; Mennecke, Valacich, & Wheeler, 2000; Purdy, Nye, & Balakrishnan, 2000). Also, results investigating email negotiator satisfaction are mixed: higher (Geiger, in press) and lower (Purdy et al., 2000) satisfaction has been reported for CMC negotiations.

These ambiguous results are characterized by Pesendorfer and Koeszegi (2006) as adhering to either a pessimistic or an optimistic view on the impact of CMC technology, e.g. email, in negotiation (p. 142). The former view ascribes low levels of social cues and increased anti-normative behavior to CMC leading to conflict intensification and negotiation breakdown (Friedman & Currall, 2003) whereas the latter view argues that social cues and relationships can be maintained in CMC leading to positive negotiation outcomes. However, they—like many other authors—mainly focus on different media properties such as visibility, audibility, reviewability and their respective influences on the cognitive, emotional and relational sphere to discuss pros and cons of CMC or FTF negotiations.

The present paper uses a slightly different approach to gain a better insight into email negotiations: We follow the idea that it is not the medium and its characteristics *per se* which determine how successfully a negotiation is conducted, but rather the interplay between the user and the medium (Barry & Fulmer, 2004; Dennis, Fuller, & Valacich, 2008). Bunz, Curry, and Voon (2007)

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as well as Schulenberg and Melton (2008) have argued that people's attitudes toward computers in general and to the Internet and email in particular "are potentially related to whether and how people interact with computer technology in a variety of contexts" (Schulenberg & Melton, 2008, p. 2621) and conclude that this constitutes a good reason to measure such attitudes. We share this view and aim at further analyzing those attitudes in the context of email negotiation. Since those authors' attitudinal measures are very general in nature and other measures did not seem fully appropriate, the first contribution of our study is to devise and validate a measure of 'email affinity'. In a second step, we test the usefulness of this construct as a predictor of economic and socio-psychological outcomes in a simulated multi-issue, integrative buyer–seller negotiation.

2. Attitudes toward email in the literature

To the best of our knowledge, a construct exclusively embracing user attitudes and proficiency toward email in general, or even more specifically in a negotiation context, has not been conceptualized in the literature yet. Scales that measure similar attitude-based constructs such as "computer aversion", "computer attitudes", "computer understanding and experience" or "computer anxiety" (e.g., LaLomia & Sidowski, 1993; Nickell & Pinto, 1986; Schulenberg & Melton, 2008) are focused on computers generally, not email specifically. Among those the Computer Aversion, Attitudes and Familiarity Index (CAAFI) asks two questions, out of thirty total questions, about email (Schulenberg & Melton, 2008): Ease of email use and frequency of email use. Bunz' (2004) earlier Computer–Email–Web (CEW) fluency scale includes six sub-scale questions on email that are rather simple and do not mirror the rapid technological developments and the changing email usage behavior over the last couple of years (e.g., "I can open an e-mail program" and "I can send an e-mail message").

Kelly and Keaten's (2007) Affect for Communications Channel Scale (ACCS) comes closest to our interest of analyzing people's attitude toward email and its connection with negotiation. Two out of three dimensions of their instrument pertain to people's affect for email: Increased Preparation and Control with email (IPC) and Reduced Anxiety and Inhibition with email (RAI). The third dimension refers to face-to-face communication and is labeled Enhanced Meaning and Emotions with face-to-face (EME). While this instrument is a great advancement compared, for instance, to Bunz' (2004) scale, it still suffers from several shortcomings with regard to email and negotiation. First, ACCS was developed to address two specific areas of computer-mediated communication: general media choice and communication reticence and apprehension (O'Sullivan, 2000). Unlike the majority of personal communication, negotiation communication is not an end in itself, but a means to an end, the resolution of opposing or conflicting interests. Accordingly, an email affinity scale adapted to a negotiation context should incorporate relevant characteristics of goal-focused communication, such as clarity, understanding and problem solving which ACCS does not cover. Second and extending the previous argument, ACCS is completely focused on the sender in communication. While it certainly represents important features of email and face-to-face communication which may signify a preference for one or the other communication mode it does not cover information exchange and mutual understanding, one aspect central to any negotiated agreement. An email affinity scale for a negotiation context should at least capture mutual understanding by addressing both sending and receiving in communication.

Hence we faced the need to develop a novel conceptualization of email affinity, a concept that encompasses attitudes towards email, before embarking on our study investigating the impact of the individual attitudes toward email on negotiation outcomes. An attitude can be defined "as a learned predisposition to respond in a consistent evaluative manner toward an object or class of objects" (Ostrom, 1969, p. 12). According to Rosenberg and Hovland's (1960) tripartite model of attitudes, attitudes reflect affective, behavioral, and cognitive evaluative responses toward the object of reference (Bagozzi, 1978; Breckler, 1984; Ostrom, 1969). This classical model of attitude appears to be a suitable starting point for conceptualizing email affinity by exploring several facets, suggested both intuitively and empirically, that expose the complexity of this communication medium.

Starting with the *affective* dimension, a person's evaluative response to email may concern its ease of use and a person's comfort with email (Gefen & Straub, 1997). In a large-scale review study aimed at unifying knowledge on the adoption of information technology in general, this notion of attitude toward IT systems use is connected to intrinsic motivation to and affect for using the technology (Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, & Davis, 2003). This dimension could be adapted to the use of email (Wang, Chen, Herath, & Rao, 2009), such that the *affective* dimension of email use would include liking and enjoying the use of email, i.e., feeling comfortable using it.

With regard to a *behavioral* dimension of email affinity, individuals differ in terms of their preference for using email for communication; this notion is at the core of the ACCS. Preference for a communication medium like email may reside in a person's dispositions or traits (Buckner, Castille, & Sheets, 2012), situational characteristics and related attitudes, or communication task characteristics (Dennis et al., 2008; Hertel, Schroer, Batinic, & Naumann, 2008). A common situational influence on communication medium preference is the difference between private and professional sphere: For instance, Utz (2007) analyzes email preference for private communication whereas Phillips and Reddie (2007) explore differences in email use (i.e. the behavioral form of preference) in a work context, also linking it to particular personal characteristics or decisions styles (e.g., self-esteem or procrastination) with mostly inconclusive findings. Our interest lies in medium preference due to communication task characteristics: A behavioral dimension of email affinity in a negotiation context should thus reflect a general tendency to choose email over other communication media according to different relevant communication characteristics, such as expressing thoughts unambiguously or solving a problem.

Possibly the most important *cognitive* component of people's evaluation of and attitude toward email as a communication medium may be the perception of how well information gets communicated over email exchanges. El-Shinnawy and Markus (1997) discuss two related concepts, uncertainty and equivocality, which speak to this. The former suggests that individuals choose to use email depending on the extent to which it limits uncertainty, i.e. facilitates the exchange of information. Some people may be comfortable writing emails and feel secure that the message they send will transfer information necessary for productive interaction. However, others may have less confidence that the medium will allow for useful information exchange. Equivocality refers to the existence of multiple interpretations or meanings of a message. Some individuals may view email as an unambiguous, concrete medium that facilitates problem-solving, while others may believe that email often leads to confusion or misunderstanding and tends to impede problem-solving and thus may hinder convergence processes in communication.

In sum, these three dimensions of email affinity boil down to: (1) email comfort (do people feel comfortable or like using email?), (2) email preference (under what conditions or contexts do individuals prefer to use email?), and (3) email clarity (can individuals appropriately express themselves and interpret the meaning of an