Shaping feelings in cyberspace: The case of Chinese seafarer-partners

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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that expressing feelings online is subject to feeling rules much like those that govern offline environments. 'Expressing feelings', however, is different from 'feeling feelings'. Does emotional interaction online change how individuals feel and, if so, in what ways? This paper addresses the question by examining a group of Chinese seafarer-partners' activities in an online group. Drawing upon emotion management theory, this paper shows that seafarer-partners in the group helped each other to reframe negative experiences in positive ways in order to suppress unpleasant feelings. It also reveals a corollary process of online emotion-shaping, namely, boosting positive feelings, by drawing upon the concept of collective effervescence. Both processes served to make seafarer-partners feel positive about their relationships. This paper thus extends previous research findings by demonstrating that online support also serves to shape how individuals feel and does so through two processes.

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1. Introduction

Research shows that computer mediated communication (CMC) tends to facilitate emotional disclosure (Bargh and McKenna, 2004; Barak et al., 2008). One reason for this is that CMC filters out physical and non-verbal cues (Sproull and Kiesler, 1991). As such, compared with face-to-face situations, CMC produces a greater sense of anonymity (Bargh and McKenna, 2004). This makes cyberspace a relatively safe space for people to reveal emotional experiences and issues (Barak et al., 2008; Derks et al., 2008; Orgad, 2005; Parr and Davidson, 2008). Another reason is that cyberspace helps people to form 'specialised communities' (Wellman, 1997, 2001), wherein community members tend to relate to each other through narrowly defined but shared interests or identities. The specialised nature of these communities makes it easy for members to empathise and identify with each other (Parr and Davidson, 2008; Preece, 2000), which in turn encourages emotional disclosure (Salem et al., 1997; Wallace, 1999). Many online communities are mutual support groups (Bargh and McKenna, 2004). Research shows that posting one's stories and/or experiences is one basic way of participating in online support groups (Lieberman and Goldstein, 2006; McGrath et al., 2008; Orgad, 2005; Salem et al., 1997).

Emotional disclosure in support groups often attracts emotional support. In a study of an online breast cancer group, for example, Radin (2006) found that the largest group of threads was about exchanging supportive and emotional comments in moments of distress and heartbreak. In a number of other studies it is noted that although postings exchanging information outnumbered those providing emotional support, the latter were still a common feature of online support groups (Blank and Adams-Blodnieks, 2007; Salem et al., 1997; van Uden-Kraan et al., 2008). The emotional support makes group members feel attached to their groups and gives them a sense of belonging and solidarity (Orgad, 2005; van Uden-Kraan et al., 2008), which further encourages intimate disclosure. As a result, Derks et al. (2008:781) following a review of studies examining the emotional aspects of CMC came to the conclusion that 'CMC is crammed with emotions'.

While emotions are widely communicated in cyberspace, the studies of Bar-Lev (2008) and Sandaunet (2008) on patient support groups have also shown that expressing feelings online is subject to feeling rules much like those that govern offline environments. In both HIV/AIDS support groups (Bar-Lev, 2008; Bar-Lev and Tillinger, 2008) and breast cancer support groups (Sandaunet, 2008), it is found that the offline discourse which encourages patients to fight their illness bravely is reproduced in cyberspace. As a result, interactions in these groups legitimise and promote a heroic image of 'moral patients' (Bar-Lev, 2008) who refuse to be defeated by illness. This, according to Sandaunet's (2008) study, made breast cancer patients reluctant to reveal feelings of hopeless and uncontrollable fear in the group. Therefore there are norms in online support groups defining what kind of emotions are appropriate to express. Those norms also affect how members respond to a posting. Sandaunet noted that postings revealing negative feelings risked being ignored by other participants. Likewise, Bar-Lev

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(2008) found that the participants of an HIV/AIDS online group supported those who expressed positive feelings but were unwilling to accept the expression of feelings of resignation.

Not to express feelings deemed 'inappropriate' does not mean not to feel these feelings. Therefore, a distinction can be made between 'expressing feelings' and 'feeling feelings'. According to the above discussion, group interaction makes it inappropriate to express some feelings online. Does it also shape how members feel (in given situations or towards particular things) and, if so, in what ways? This paper addresses this question by examining a group of Chinese seafarer-partners'[1] activities in an online group called the *Home of Chinese Seafarers* (HCS). Drawing upon emotion management theory (Hochschild, 1979, 1983), this paper shows that seafarer-partners in the group helped each other to reframe negative experience in positive ways in order to suppress the associated unpleasant feelings. Furthermore, the paper reveals a corollary process of online emotion-shaping, namely, boosting positive feelings, by drawing upon the concept of collective effervescence (Durkheim, [1912] 1976).

2. Emotion management

Goffman (1969) observed that in everyday interaction social actors are engaged in creating a desirable 'front' through managing appearance, manner, talking, emotional expression and other 'stage props' according to social norms. According to Goffman, societies 'must mobilize their numbers as self-regulating participants in social encounters' in order to be societies; and correspondingly, the members of societies have to learn and perform 'interaction ritual' to become competent social actors (Goffman, 1972: 44). Partially based on Goffman's concept of self management, Hochschild (1979, 1983) developed emotion management theory. She notes that in societies there exists a set of 'feeling rules', that is, social norms governing what one should feel in specific contexts. In everyday life, individuals manage their feelings through 'emotion work', either suppressing inappropriate but present feelings or evoking desired but absent emotions according to the rules. Thus, Hochschild argues that the self is an 'emotion manager' working on feelings, or more accurately, mis-feelings, in order to comply with social norms. Those who do not manage their feelings and self-presentation properly face social sanctions (Goffman, 1972; Hochschild, 1979, 1983).

Besides working on their own feelings individually, people also help each other to manage emotions collectively (Francis, 1994). Thoits (1985) argues that in certain situations individuals may not be able to manage their undesirable feelings effectively and therefore need others' help and support to combat emotional problems. Thoits points out that support from formal or informal social institutions could help individuals to contain their emotional tensions successfully. Drawing upon Hochschild's work, several authors have demonstrated that emotion management is effective when a group of people collaborate in managing each others' undesirable feelings (Francis, 1997; Lively, 2000; Thoits, 1996) and in generating appropriate emotions (Orzechowicz, 2008; Smith, 2008).

A group may not only help to effectively evoke a particular feeling in individuals, but may also further reinforce and boost this feeling through collective expression. The latter aspect is most vividly captured in Durkheim's idea of collective effervescence.

3. Collective effervescence

Emotions occupy an important place in Durkheim's work (Fisher and Chon, 1989). According to Durkheim ([1893] 1984), when people express similar emotions these emotions reinforce each other and merge into a collective passion. This idea was further developed into the concept of 'collective effervescence' which arises when people are assembled together to exchange similar sentiments in the presence of what they hold to be sacred (Shilling, 1997). To explicate the process, Durkheim ([1912] 1976: 215) described a religious gathering of aboriginal Australian tribes:

> The very fact of concentration acts as an exceptionally powerful stimulant. When they are once come together [sic], a sort of electricity is formed by their collecting which quickly transports them to an extraordinary degree of exaltation. Every sentiment expressed finds a place without resistance in all the minds, which are very open to outside impressions; each re-echoes the others, and is re-echoed by the others. The initial impulse thus proceeds, growing as it goes, as an avalanche grows in its advance.

For Durkheim, a collective consciousness, or a social will, is manifested in this process, which is superior to, and much more powerful than, the individual consciousnesses. Therefore, in a situation where effervescence is aroused, we feel moved by the common sentiment or belief; and

> [w]e feel that we are being led, directed, and carried along by singular energies that, manifestly, do not come from us but are imposed on us from the outside (Durkheim, 1960: 335).

This is not to say that the energy is transferred from outside. Rather, it is stimulated from within by the joint sentiment or social will. The social will, in a sense, boosts individuals' vitality by stirring up their latent energy. Therefore, according to Durkheim, the extraordinary power that one feels during effervescence is derived from the collectivity or society.

Collective effervescence manifests a strong solidarity. In everyday life, the solidarity or collective sentiment may not be able to charge individuals with extraordinary power. It nevertheless supports and sustains us. For example, when our friends express esteem, sympathy or affection toward our actions, we feel comfortable and confident. In *Suicide*, Durkheim ([1897] 1951) reveals that when collective sentiments are strong the moral support individuals receive from each other provides them with strength to cling to their lives despite suffering.

Emotion management and collective effervescence suggest that feelings can be shaped in several ways in groups: they can be suppressed; they can be evoked; and they can also be reinforced. In which way they are likely to be shaped seems related to social norms. Feelings that fit with norms would be evoked and reinforced, while those unfit are likely to be suppressed. As such both theories can be used together to make sense of how feelings can be collectively shaped in groups. This paper will show that in the HCS individuals' feelings can also be shaped collectively in these ways, but first I shall introduce the research context and methods.

4. Research context and methods

Due to the nature of seafaring careers, seafaring couples often endure long-term separation. For Chinese seafaring couples, separation of around one year is common (Thomas et al., 2003). During the separation period, seafarer-partners are likely to suffer loneliness and isolation (Brown-Decker, 1978; Foster and Cacioppe, 1986; Parker et al., 1998; Tang, 2007; Thomas, 2003). Although modern technologies, such as email and mobile and satellite telephony have

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[1] In China, except a few women who work as stewardesses on cruise vessels, seafarers are males. This study focuses on partners of the latter. Furthermore, this research only takes heterosexual seafaring couples into account. Therefore, seafarer-partners in this thesis refer to seafarers' wives and (unmarried) seafarers' girlfriends.