A Look into Digital Emotion Contagion during Shared Role Integration

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A Look into Digital Emotion Contagion During Shared Role Integration

TREO Talk Paper

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Abstract

The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic has brought the surge of the Great Reshuffle, with many people rethinking their career paths and personal life trajectories. Because the quarantines, lockdowns and self-imposed isolation limited interpersonal communication in most offline settings, people have turned to social networking sites to communicate their feelings and thoughts about the changes in their work-life interface. With the unprecedented number of employees being forced to work from home, the stigma that remote work was less productive has diminished (Barrero et al., 2021). A survey from LinkedIn (2021) suggests that when considering a job opportunity, the most important factor for people across 200 countries was work-life balance. The desire for flexible work options has increased by 12.3% since the beginning of the pandemic, making it the fastest-growing priority among job candidates on LinkedIn. While the increasing demand for flexible working arrangements has received much attention from different stakeholders and segments of the society, it remains largely unclear why and how the collective perception about remote work has changed so rapidly and the extent to which it is associated with people’s shared experiences about work-life role integration in the digital sphere.

This research focuses on examining the influence of digital emotion transmission in the phase of shared role integration. Drawn on the literature on emotional contagion (Hatfield et al., 1993) and micro-role transitions (Ashforth et al. 2000), we suggest that the disruptive changes during the pandemic made one’s work-life boundary more permeable and flexible than that prior to the pandemic. As a result, remote workers were likely to engage in an increasing number of micro-role transitions. In the absence of mental scripts for such transitions, people were more likely to share their experiences about their daily episodes of role interruptions and boundary work online. Because emotional content tends to be promoted in digital platforms, users of these platforms are likely be exposed to others’ affective expressions with a high level of frequency and intensity (Goldenberg & Gross, 2020). As such, feelings about work-life role integration are likely to spread and gradually become convergent among those platform users. This research will leverage sentiment analysis and econometrics to reveal how people’s emotional expressions of remote work have changed during the pandemic as well as to uncover the trajectory of digital emotion contagion patterns.

This study can have a number of significant research and practical implications. First, emotional contagion can occur through different mechanisms (Hatfield et al., 1993). The present research can help to identify what forms of digital communication are likely to trigger emotional transmission through each of the mechanisms. Second, because emotional contagion precedes the formation of collective emotions (Hatfield et al., 2014), the present research can help to delineate the emergence process of collective emotions in online social systems. Given that the majority of remote work is supported by information and communication technologies (ICT), this research can help to clarify how collective emotions about ICT applications are formed and changed in online environments. Third, an examination of sentiments expressed in the digital space about work-life role integration during the pandemic can help to further understand the role of digital emotion contagion in shaping the shared perceptions towards flexible work options and work-life balance. Lastly, this line of research can help to inform policy makers of how work policies can be formulated to enhance the benefits of ICT-enabled flexible work arrangements and at the same time mitigate the negative impacts of such arrangements on employee’s personal well-being.
References


