

Chapter 6

Reply Timing and Emotional Strategy in Mobile Text Communications of Japanese Young People: Replies to Messages Conveying Four Different Emotions

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors present two studies that examine the timing of replies to mobile text messages, especially the behavior of intentionally waiting before replying. As the first step in Study 1, 42 Japanese university subjects were asked by questionnaire survey whether they would wait before replying to mobile text messages they received, and if so, in which situations they would they wait. A large percentage of respondents suggested that they would sometimes wait before replying to a mobile text message. The freeform responses also indicated the involvement of an emotional aspect in most cases where subjects did not immediately reply to a mobile text message, even when they were capable of doing so. For Study 2, 224 Japanese university students were asked to rate on a 6-point scale whether they would wait before replying to mobile text messages from senders conveying each of four emotions: happiness, sadness, anger, and guilt. They were also asked to give a freeform answer as to why they would respond in such a way. The results showed that for each of the four emotional settings, subjects adjust the timing of message replies in order to manipulate the emotions of others or their own emotions, according to the situation. Individual differences were also observed in subjects' thoughts about adjusting reply timing and manipulating emotions.

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INTRODUCTION

Background

With the spread of e-mail, text-based messages have replaced communications that until now were made by letter or fax and they have now become a normal part of our daily life. It is especially common for Japanese young people to use the mobile email functionality of mobile telephones (hereafter referred to as mobile text messaging) as a form of conversation. Mobile text messaging is also frequently used in Japan when voice communications are difficult or socially unacceptable to make: it is this type of social prohibition that promotes its use. For instance, making and receiving voice calls on public transportation is limited (and in some areas, prohibited) and train, bus, and subway companies make frequent announcements reminding passengers to turn off their phones or change them to silent mode. Many passengers accept these restrictions and turn to mobile text messaging to stay in touch with others while riding the train or subway (Okabe & Ito, 2006).

However, with its limitations in expressing emotions and other non-verbal cues, text communication is said to be susceptible to misunderstandings or miscommunication, especially when attempting to convey emotions (e.g., Short, et al., 1976, Sproull & Kiesler, 1986, Dyer, et al., 1995, Hancock, 2007, Scott, et al., 2009). With the goal of gaining educational insight into how to avoid these kinds of problems in text communication, we focused on various aspects based on the daily experience of users to consider these problems. For example, previous studies on message content or writing style have shown that posing questions to the reader or using emoticons are effective for invoking happiness or positive emotion in the reader (Kato, et al., 2002, 2006a). Previous studies examining the perspective of parties in email conversation considered the impact of text written by persons with a different perspective on reader emotion (Kato, et al., 2006b). The results

suggest that familiar expressions in an email from a classmate, or an honest and serious writing style for an email received from a person of seniority, such as an instructor, can invoke positive emotions in student readers. Furthermore, previous studies on the transmission of emotion that investigated which emotional states of a writer would be incorrectly interpreted by the reader (Kato, et al., 2007a, 2007b) found that, compared to positive emotions which were correctly conveyed, emotions such as sadness or anger were difficult to convey and were easily misunderstood. A previous study on emoticons in conveyance of emotion (Kato, et al., 2009) also suggests that mistakes in interpreting emotion were more likely for emoticons that convey negative emotions than emoticons that convey positive ones.

As an example, one of the authors recently heard about the following problem. A university professor working late at night to prepare for class sent an advance email to students' mobile phones with various details about the lecture. However, one of the students objected to the professor's conduct, citing loss of sleep and the need to reply to the professor's mobile text messaging sent late at night as the basis for the complaint. Related to this anecdote, this chapter summarizes the research conducted to date on reply timing for mobile text messaging.

Emotional Strategy

The authors focus on the use of emotional strategy in text communications, taking the Emotional Intelligence (EI) model (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Mayer, 2000) as a theoretical background. The EI model emphasizes "internal emotional aspects" and addresses "how to deal with emotions that should be suppressed." The authors apply this model to the communication process (Kato, et al., 2008), and use the term "emotional strategy" to refer to the act of manipulating the interaction between "emotional aspects of self and those of another party." When we communicate, we some-

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