

STYLE AND CONTENT IN E-MAILS AND LETTERS TO MALE AND FEMALE FRIENDS

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This study examined gender differences in the style and content of e-mails and letters sent to friends on the topic of how time had been spent in the previous summer. Gender differences were found in both style and content supporting previous findings that female communication is more relational and expressive than that of males and focuses more upon personal and domestic topics. Women used the less formal stylistic conventions of e-mails to signal excitability in different ways to their male and female friends, whereas men ended their communications in a more relational way to their female than their male friends, and the nature of this difference varied according to the type of communication used.

Keywords: *gender; language; e-mails; letters; friends*

As e-mail has become established as a major and rapid communication medium, it has evolved a less formal style than that of letters. Baron (1998) constructed a linguistic profile of e-mail in relation to writing and speech. Its format is durable and searchable, like writing, but tends to use shorter chunks and lack editing, like speech. Its lexicon is mainly speech-like, being heavily first- and second-person based and using more attributive adjectives and intensifiers. Its syntax frequently uses the present tense like speech but adverbial subordinate clauses ("since" . . . , "while" . . .) like writing. Finally, its style is more

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like speech: less formal with salutation and signature optional, more humor, and less censored emotional tone. Special features have evolved within e-mails to facilitate rapid writing, for example, the phonological representation of a word such as *c* for "see," abbreviations such as *BTW* for "by the way," and the addition of graphic accents such as :-) to convey emotion.

This study compared e-mails with conventional letters in order to examine whether gender differences vary in the two media. Women's written language has been found to contain more emotional features, such as markers of excitability (e.g., exclamation marks or intensifying adverbs), and nonessentials (e.g., parenthesized words or phrases, trailing dots) indicative of embellishment or digression in a weaker and less direct language style (Rubin & Greene, 1992). These features lend themselves to the more informal style of e-mails. Existing evidence shows gender differences are present in some features of friendly online exchanges between men and women. Thomson and Murachver (2001) assigned netpals of the same sex to participants and examined the e-mails sent to them over a short period. The men gave more opinions and used more insults, whereas the women used more questions, compliments, apologies, and intensifying adverbs. In the more competitive context of online discussion lists, gender differences are, if anything, more apparent, particularly in men's greater use of humor and offensive language (e.g. Herring, 1994). One of the major uses of e-mail is to communicate with friends rather than strangers or new acquaintances, providing a substitute for a letter or telephone call. If e-mail is informal and relatively uncensored, in friendly exchanges particularly, we hypothesized that it may offer more opportunity than the conventional letter for women to use emotional and relational features and for men to use humor and offensive language.

The sex of the recipient is relevant to such a comparison. Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991) emphasizes the importance of social goals in determining language style. CAT predicts that those interacting can emphasize their similarities or differences through their use of gender-linked language features. In friendly mixed-sex conversations, convergence may attenuate gender differences (e.g., Fitzpatrick, Mulac, & Dindia, 1995). Divergence may flag hostility or emphasize complementarity (Burgoon, Stern, & Dillman, 1995). Winn and Rubin (2001) found that participants used divergent strategies to emphasize their gender when presenting themselves in personal ads. Similarly, Colley and Todd (2002) found more feminine features in e-mails from women to men than to other women, indicating that divergence was used to increase the recipient's interest. Giles and Powesland (1975) discussed the conflict that may arise between accommodation and normative influences, including sexual norms. In heterosexual conversations,

signaling sexuality may not be served by convergence of style but rather by the emphasis of differences. Thus individuals may be able to manipulate the way in which they “do gender” through their use of gendered language features. In the less formal style of e-mails, is this manipulation more apparent than in letters?

In addition to gender differences in the use of linguistic features, there are also differences in the topics covered by men and women in friendly communications. For example, Aries and Johnson (1983) found that close female friends spent more time discussing personal problems, family and other intimate relationships, their concerns, and daily activities, whereas close male friends spent more time discussing sport. Because Baron (1998) concluded that e-mails encourage greater personal disclosure, we hypothesized that women’s e-mails to same-sex friends would contain more discussion of personal topics than men’s, and that e-mails, in general, would encourage more disclosure than letters.

In this study, e-mails and letters were collected from 48 male and 48 female undergraduate students from the University of Leicester (mean age = 19.8 years). A total of 12 males and 12 females were allocated to each of four groups. The groups were based on the type of communication participants were asked to write: a letter or e-mail to a male or female friend they had not seen for a while, informing him/her how they had spent their time over the summer (the study was conducted in autumn). The purpose of the communication, therefore, was to re-establish contact and update the friend on recent events in the participant’s life. The communications were not entirely naturalistic but achieving access to such personal material raises the issue of self-selection. It is possible that self-censorship of the language or the content still took place, although it is worth noting that participants in Mehl and Pennebaker’s (2003) study of conversations chose not to censor very private interchanges. A further potential disadvantage of our method is that the senders were aware that their communications would not reach the recipient, so a follow-up using real exchanges would add ecological validity to this line of research.

The participants were identified by number and told to use a pseudonym for their friend. The letters were written by hand. The e-mails were sent using Microsoft Outlook to an e-mail address provided. The participants in the e-mail conditions were told that their e-mails would be forwarded to a second address with identifiers removed, and the original deleted to ensure anonymity.

We used two kinds of coding categories: style and content. The style categories focused upon formality, excitability, nonessentials and relational devices, and were derived from previous studies of electronic and written communication (e.g., Colley & Todd, 2002; Petrie, 2000; Rubin & Greene, 1992) with the constraint that they were relevant to

the communication of personal information between friends. A preliminary coding of a sample of the data confirmed their relevance and presence in the data.

Two of the style categories used, humor and offensive language, were of low frequency, so were scored as present or absent and analyzed using chi square. The remaining seven style categories were counted and converted to frequency per 50 words, then analyzed using a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ (Sex of Sender \times Sex of Recipient \times E-mail or Letter \times Category) MANOVA with follow-up univariate analyses: questions (relational), multiple exclamation marks (excitability), positive intensifier (e.g., really, so, hugely) (excitability), trailing dots (nonessential), non-essentials signaling digression (i.e., brackets, dashes), abbreviations typically used in e-mails (e.g., c u soon) (formality), and incomplete sentences (e.g., "Mind you really glad of the money") (formality).

The content categories were all nominal and analyzed using chi square. Topic categories similar to those of Aries and Johnson (1983) were derived from a sample of the data. The activities categories were as follows: sport, holidays, work, finances, drink, shopping, clubs. The relationships categories were as follows: family, specific same-sex friend(s), specific opposite-sex friend(s). The personal disclosure categories were as follows: specific incident described, positive emotion, and negative emotion.

The remaining categories coded the relational content of the salutation and signature of the messages because e-mails might encourage a more intimate style, particularly from women. In the salutation, we coded the presence of an initial personal enquiry. This usually followed the first part of the salutation but occasionally started the communication (e.g., "How are things going babe?" followed "Hi" from female e-mailing female). For the signature, we coded the presence of mention of future contact prior to the ending (e.g., "Really hope we can meet up soon as I really would like to hear how you've been," male letter to female), and the presence of an affectionate signature (e.g., "love you lots," female letter to female). For the categories requiring interpretation, the interrater reliability from two coders was 97.1%. For the categories requiring the counting of punctuation marks such as multiple exclamations, word processor tools allowed each occurrence to be located and marked.

Word counts of all the communications used revealed that the women wrote longer communications than the men (word count: women $M = 285.6$, $SD = 132.7$, men $M = 213.9$, $SD = 98.6$; $F(1, 88) = 10.41$, $p = .002$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .10$) and that the letters were longer than the e-mails (word count: letter $M = 289.7$, $SD = 130.1$, e-mail $M = 209.8$, $SD = 98.8$; $F(1, 88) = 12.92$, $p = .001$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .13$).

We examined the formality of the two types of communication to confirm that the e-mails contained more informal features than the letters. The multivariate comparison of the e-mails and letters was

Table 1
Significant Three-Way Interactions Between Sex of Sender, Sex of Recipient, and Type of Communication

Sender	Mode	Recipient	Positive Intensifier		Multiple Exclamation	
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Male	E-mail	Male	0.34	0.39	0.12	0.31
		Female	0.27	0.29	0.09	0.31
	Letter	Male	0.33	0.24	0.02	0.05
		Female	0.25	0.26	0.13	0.26
Female	E-mail	Total	0.30	0.29	0.09	0.25
		Male	1.03	0.59	0.13	0.26
	Letter	Female	0.48	0.41	0.91	1.14
		Male	0.55	0.41	0.12	0.16
	Total	Female	0.67	0.35	0.19	0.15
		Male	0.68	0.49	0.34	0.70
		Total	0.68	0.49	0.34	0.70

significant, $F(7, 82) = 2.15, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .16$. Overall, the e-mails contained more abbreviations typical of electronic communication (e-mail $M = 0.52, SD = 0.81$; letter $M = 0.16, SD = 0.70; F(1, 88) = 5.35, p = .02, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .06$), incomplete sentences (e-mail $M = 0.62, SD = 0.90$; letter $M = 0.31, SD = 0.41; F(1, 88) = 4.58, p = .03, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .05$), and multiple exclamations (e-mail $M = 0.31, SD = 0.70$; letter $M = 0.11, SD = 0.27; F(1, 88) = 4.04, p = .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .04$).

A higher proportion of males (33%) than females (15%) used offensive language, $\chi^2(1) = 4.63, p < .05$, but this did not differ with mode of communication.

The multivariate analysis revealed a further medium-sized effect of gender, $F(7, 82) = 5.54, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .32$ and of the 3-way interaction between sex of sender, recipient sex and type of communication, multivariate, $F(7, 82) = 2.17, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .16$. Follow-up univariate analyses showed that women used more positive intensifiers than men, $F(1, 88) = 24.68, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .22$ and a smaller but similar effect was found for multiple exclamations, $F(1, 88) = 6.40, p = .013, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .07$. The corresponding univariate 3-way interactions were also significant positive intensifiers: $F(1, 88) = 4.99, p = .03, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .05$; multiple exclamation marks: $F(1, 88) = 4.54, p = .04, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .05$, see Table 1. Follow-up Tukey tests revealed that the women used significantly more positive intensifiers in e-mails to male friends than in e-mails to women or letters to men. The difference with letters to women was in the same direction but nonsignificant. The women also used significantly more multiple exclamations in e-mails to women than in the other communications. No significant results were obtained from the Tukey comparisons of the men's data.

Finally, although both the men and women used humor in half of the communications coded, women used humor more in e-mails (58%)

Table 2
Significant Gender Differences for Content Categories

Category	% Male	% Female	χ^2
Family	27.1	92.0	4.44*
Shopping	2.1	37.5	18.96***
Clubs	14.6	45.5	3.77*
Specific incident	43.8	64.6	4.20*
Positive emotion	81.2	97.9	7.14**
Initial personal enquiry	62.5	87.5	8.00**
Affectionate sign-off	33.3	72.9	15.10***

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 3
Content Categories that Varied According to the Sex of the Recipient and Type of Communication

Sex of Sender	Category	Letter			E-mail		
		% to Male	% to Female	χ^2	% to Male	% to Female	χ^2
Male	Sport	41.7	0.0	6.32*	50.0	8.3	5.04*
Female	Sport	58.3	0.0	9.88**	8.3	8.3	0.00
Male	Same-sex friend	66.7	25.0	4.20*	16.7	33.3	0.89
Female	Same-sex friend	16.7	66.7	6.17*	33.3	58.3	1.51
Male	Future contact	83.3	91.7	0.38	66.7	100.0	4.80*
Male	Affectionate signature	8.3	75.0	10.97***	25.0	16.7	0.89

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

than in letters (21%), $\chi^2(1) = 7.06, p < .01$; and within the e-mails, significantly more in e-mails to females (83.3%) than to males (33%), $\chi^2(1) = 6.17, p < .05$. No effects of this kind were found in the data from the men.

There were overall gender differences in the topics. More women than men mentioned family, shopping and clubs, a specific incident, and positive emotion (see Table 2). Sport was mentioned more frequently to male than female recipients in e-mails and letters from men and letters from women. More senders of both sexes mentioned a specific same-sex friend in letters to friends of the same sex than to friends of the other sex.

Further gender differences were found in two of the relational categories relating to salutation and signature. More women than men made initial personal enquiries and gave affectionate signatures (see Table 2). However, more men gave affectionate signatures in letters to women than to men, and mentioned future contact in more e-mails to women than to men (see Table 3).

The results confirm previous findings that men use more offensive language, whereas women's communication shows more emotionality (e.g., Rubin & Greene, 1992). The women used more multiple exclamation marks, and to an even greater extent, signaled emphasis by using positive intensifiers such as "really" (e.g., "I went to the V2001 Festival, and the Leeds Carling Music Festival. They were both amazing, but I'm still tortured by the memories of the porta-loos. I saw some really great bands . . .," female e-mail to male) and "soooo" (e.g., "Went to Greece with Kate for a week. It was brilliant! It was sooooo hot!" female e-mail to female). The women also described positive emotion more frequently. Their higher relational motivation (e.g., Colley & Todd, 2002; Tannen, 1990) was evident in their greater use of initial personal enquiries and affectionate signatures. With respect to the topics covered, the greater focus of women upon people, domestic topics, and feelings (Aries & Johnson, 1983) was also present here. More women than men mentioned family, shopping, clubs, and specific incidents in which they were involved.

However, most interesting are the interactions between the type of communication and the recipient for some features of style and content. In the less formal e-mails, women used more humor and multiple exclamation marks to their female friends. In Colley and Todd's (2002) study, the reverse was found; more humor and multiple exclamation marks were present in female to male e-mails, suggesting a desire by the women to engage the interest of their male friends and signal intimacy. The difference between the two studies may lie in the nature of the e-mails used. Colley and Todd's study asked participants to inform a friend wishing to visit a recent holiday destination of theirs, of its good and bad points, and to describe their holiday experience. The communications focused on the place rather than the person (what was it like to holiday in Salou?). The task in the current study was focused upon the person and personal experiences (what were you doing over the summer?) and hence was, arguably, more intimate. The use of linguistic devices by women to signal intimacy to their male friends may therefore not have been necessary.

Although humor increases arousal and hence alters emotional tone, it can also be used to reinforce relational identity (Boxer & Conde, 1997; Giles, Bourhis, Gadfield, Davies, & Davies, 1976), which may explain why females used it more in e-mails to other females in the present study. Multiple exclamation marks give emotional emphasis to particular parts of a description and anticipate a joint reaction. Thus humor and multiple exclamation marks in the female-to-female e-mails may signal the sharing of an emotional reaction and can be viewed as an accommodation effect, to the friend's gender, closeness, or both. Same-sex friendships are regarded as closer than opposite-sex friendships (Block, 1980), so these findings may illustrate this. The women used more positive intensifiers in e-mails to male than female friends.

These, again, intensify the force of a description and hence the emotional emphasis but do not invite the recipient to share the experience, rather they draw attention to particular events or reactions. As Giles and Powesland (1975) discussed, accommodation effects take place within a broader context in which roles, relationships, and motivation all play a part.

Such effects were not present in the letters, so as hypothesized, the informal conventions of e-mails may allow women to express emotional tone, albeit slightly differently, to their male and female friends. Unfortunately, one limitation of our study is the lack of a measure of closeness of the friendship, so it is possible that the female same-sex friendships were closer than the female to male friendships, and we are currently investigating closeness as an additional variable. A further issue arises from the methodology: Because the e-mails were not taken from real exchanges, rather than indicating accommodation in an ongoing exchange, the participants could have been reacting to stereotypes or memories of their recipients' styles.

We interpret the men's mention of future contact and affectionate language at the end of their communications to women as convergence, and this took a different form in the e-mails and letters. In the letters, with their more formal requirements for signature (Baron, 1998), affectionate signatures were used. In the e-mails with their more informal format, mention of future contact may have provided the men with the main opportunity to signal intimacy and the desire to continue friendship with their female friends.

Only two topics varied with the mode of communication and sex of recipient. Sport, a particularly masculine topic (e.g., Scully, 1998), was mentioned more to male recipients in all communications except e-mails from women. Same-sex friends were mentioned more by both sexes in letters to same-sex friends, possibly reflecting both the greater closeness of same-sex relationships (Block, 1980) and the fact that letters have a longer turnaround time and encourage friends to "catch up" on news of others.

In many respects, our findings concur with the gender differences found in previous studies. However, what our comparison of e-mails and letters has found in addition, is that stylistic features encouraged by the less formal style of e-mail, specifically markers of excitability and nonessentials, are used more by women, and this usage varies according to the gender of the recipient. It also appears that the difference in formality between e-mails and letters influences the way in which men communicate to their same-sex and opposite-sex friends, specifically in the way in which they end a communication. These preliminary findings indicate that the growth of e-mail as a major communication medium may bring with it shorter and more rapid exchanges but also more subtle variations in the way in which we communicate with others.

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