

# Emailing Among Friends Is No Clearer Than With Strangers



By Erik Lief — September 1, 2016



Emailing Among Friends Is No Clearer Than With Strangers [1]

While George Bernard Shaw is remembered as a prolific and influential playwright, the award-winning Irishman also knew a thing or two about the art of communication. After all, he wrote 60 plays, including *Pygmalion*, spending the better part of his 94 years trying to reach his audiences.

So it's interesting (and a bit clever) for the authors of a study focusing on the effectiveness of current-day emailing to quote the 1925 winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature. He most likely could never have conceived of future creations like the smartphone or emoji, but he was quite aware of the difficulty humans had when it came to effectively making their points to one another.

"The single biggest problem in communication," according to Shaw, "is the illusion that it has taken place."

That's largely the paper's "theme," to quote Monica Riordan and Lauren Trichtinger, researchers from the Department of Psychology at Chatham University in Pittsburgh, and co-authors of "[Overconfidence at the Keyboard: Confidence and Accuracy in Interpreting Affect in E-Mail Exchanges.](#)" [2] The duo concluded that emailing is rife with miscommunication, exchanges have a difficult time conveying feelings properly, and most interestingly that emails among friends are no more effective than those between total strangers.

In their study, published in the journal *Human Communication Research*, Riordan and Trichtinger concluded that when it comes to emailing -- or computer-mediated communication (CMC) in their parlance -- "it is clear that reliance upon friendship and situational knowledge when interpreting emotion is ineffective at best, detrimental at worst."

The researchers conducted three studies to examine whether friends could better understand emails than strangers, and whether using emojis and CAPS could effectively convey the sender's intended emotions and feelings. Fifty participants were involved in the initial two experiments; 25 women and 25 men in the first (median age 37), and 26 women and 24 men in the second (median age 32.5).

"In the first two studies, writers wrote two e-mails, indicating the presence or absence of eight different emotions in each e-mail," [one report](#) <sup>[3]</sup> summarized. "One e-mail was based on a predetermined scenario, and the other freely written. These e-mails were then read by strangers, who rated each e-mail for those same eight emotions," those being:

- anger
- disgust
- sadness
- fear
- joy
- surprise
- anticipation
- trust

For these two experiments, the authors concluded that "readers were more confident in their interpretations if a greater percentage of positive words existed in the e-mail, but this effect was only true for context-absent e-mails. Verbal cues [e.g. emoticons, use of all CAPS, repeated exclamation marks] had no effect on accuracy." Meanwhile, readers "were no more or less confident in the accuracy of their interpretation whether context was given or not. In fact, readers were poor judges of their accuracy."

In the third experiment, to test the impact of relationships, 70 people (or 35 pairs of writers, or "dyads") sent emails to strangers -- and friends. They then rated them for the eight emotions before writing response emails. Yet the misunderstandings continued.

"Although friends were more confident than strangers in their interpretations when reading an e-mail, this confidence turned out to be unwarranted, since they were both equally (in)accurate overall in their interpretations," wrote Riordan and Trichtinger. "In Experiment 3, we actually found that writers had less confidence in the reader's ability to correctly interpret context-given e-mails than context-absent e-mails."

Just as interesting as the co-authors choosing to cite Shaw in their study is that *Pygmalion*, perhaps his most celebrated play, which publicly debuted in 1913, highlighted the art of communication. Stressing language instruction and proper elocution, phonetics professor Henry Higgins sought to teach social outcast Eliza Doolittle how to pass herself off among England's elite. More than a century later, crafting the right impression continues to be just as challenging.

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