

Gender and Emotional Expressiveness: An Analysis of Prosodic Features in Emotional Expression

RÓISÍN PARKINS*

Abstract

Studies looking into emotional differences between men and women are plentiful. Conventional wisdom leads us to believe that women are more emotional than men, or at least are more emotionally expressive (Kring & Gordon 1998). This conventional wisdom has been supported by the results of many academic research papers indicating that women are indeed the more emotionally expressive of the genders (e.g. Ashmore & Del Boca 1979; Brody & Hall 2000; Johnson & Shulman 1988). The purpose of this paper is to examine the emotional expressivity of men and women in the realm of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Data was collected through the analysis of posts, tweets and comments from a sample of native Australian men and women and the implications of the findings from this data are discussed.

1. Introduction

There is a common assumption that has transpired over the years with regard to women being more emotionally expressive than men. Many studies have been conducted, examining emotional expressiveness in males and females and there is a fairly substantial body of research demonstrating that women are the more emotionally expressive gender (Kring & Gordon 1998). In addition to this there are certain emotions that have been stereotypically linked to each gender. Emotions of happiness, sadness and fear are believed to be more characteristic of women, whereas men are believed to be more characteristically angry (Kelly & Hutson-Comeaux 1999). Most of the experiments carried out to observe gender differences in emotional expressiveness have been focused on face-to-face interactions. However, these days the internet and in particular, social networking sites, are a huge part of everyday communication. Therefore, an analysis of emotional expressiveness in on-line discourse is pertinent to today's society. This paper will explore emotional expressiveness with regard to Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). Other researchers have carried out experiments which emphasize the text and the linguistic features associated with expressing emotion rather than the representations of paralinguistic features that help the writer in emotional expressivity. The aim of this paper is to investigate how paralinguistic features are represented, how these representations are used to express emotion and how they are used by men and women.

1.1 Gender and the Expression of Emotions

Gender differences in emotional expressiveness is not a new area of study by any means. There are many different studies which analyse the way in which males and females are seen to express different levels of emotion and how each possesses some stereotypical emotions which are deemed socially acceptable for males and females to display. These socially acceptable displays of emotion, with regard to gender, are usually instilled in the members of a culture from early childhood.

Researchers such as Birnbaum, Nosanchuk and Croll (1980) have found in their studies that these gender-specific stereotypes are observed in children as early as preschool age (Kelly & Hutson-Comeaux 2002). This instilment of socially acceptable displayable emotions from early childhood will become more sophisticated as children mature. Ideally, they will continue to express their emotions 'correctly' to illustrate their social competence. This is done because subconsciously we are aware that the way we express or manage our emotions has a significant influence on the initiation, facilitation and maintenance of social relationships (Campos, Mumme, Kermoian & Campos 1994). This early shaping of our views on emotional expressivity results in women being more emotionally expressive than men. It is important to note that we are talking about the expression of experiences and not the actual experience itself; the external rather than the internal. Studies such as Fabes and Martin (1991) show that women are perceived to express emotions more than men but that there was little difference in the perception of men and women's emotional experience. "Therefore, it appears that the consistent gender differences in the emotion stereotype literature are based on beliefs about the expression of emotion more than they are on beliefs about the emotional experience." (Kelly & Huston-Comeaux 2002).

All of these findings on emotional expressivity have largely been based on experiments involving face-to-face observation and reactions. However as society becomes more technologically advanced it has seen the rise in social networking sites as a common means of communication. Many people believe that this rise in online communication and the change in communication patterns that it has brought with it through changing technologies (Trevino, Webster & Stein, 2000) may contribute to breaking down the stereotype that sees women as the more emotionally expressive of the genders, due to the relative anonymity that comes with online communication. This sparks the research point of this paper. It is hypothesised that regardless of the way in which online social networking has influenced changes in communication, gender stereotypes to which people are exposed from early childhood and the socially acceptable ways in which genders can act will still be dominant, and that women will still be the more emotionally expressive gender. A second hypothesis is that women will make more use of emotional expression markers than men to help display their emotions online.

Face-to-face communication provides contextual cues as to when it is socially appropriate to express certain emotions. These emotions are expressed both linguistically, through what is said in response, and paralinguistically, through features such as intonation, high pitch, pause, accent, nonverbal signs and gestures such as facial expressions (Park 2007). However online, people's expressions, intonation, pitch or gestures can not be noted.

There have been few studies conducted on how emotional expressiveness is marked within online discourse and how different genders use emotional markers. This paper will examine this research gap by exploring six common markers that are creatively employed to deliver prosodic features and therefore help express emotions.

2. Methodology

A total of 50 participants took part in this study, all of whom were native Australians. To achieve a greater degree of generalisability and to limit bias between the sexes, 25 of the

participants were males and the other 25 were females. The participants were aged between 17 and 25 and were a mixture of students and people in the workforce.

The 50 participants were chosen at random from social networking sites, in particular from Facebook and Twitter. Status updates, wall posts, comments and tweets were collected for analysis from the participants' Facebook or Twitter accounts.

Once the fifty participants had been chosen, the process was explained to them and permission was gained to examine their Facebook and Twitter accounts for different types of emotional expression markers. Through examining the participants' Facebook and Twitter accounts it was observed that there were six common techniques that were used to express emotion. This is not to say that there were no more than six: these were the most common and it was therefore decided that these emotional expressive markers would be observed for this study. The emotion markers analysed were:

1. the extensive use of punctuation markers (such as !! and ??)
2. the use of extensive full stops used within a speech sample (e.g.); only three or more were considered to be extensive use, as two could merely be a typing error
3. the use of capitalized text
4. the addition of the same letter within a word (e.g. *yeeeeees*)
5. the general use of emotions (e.g. ☺, ☹)
6. the different means of expressing laughter (e.g. *lol, hehe, haha*)

Each participant's Facebook and/or Twitter account was examined over a two-week period. Each day the researcher recorded how many times each expression marker was used. These expression markers were not merely limited to their Facebook status or their Tweets: their wall posts on their friends' walls were also observed, as were their comments on other people's status, photos, wall posts, tweets and so on. In addition, as a point of interest, the researcher also recorded the frequency at which the emotional expression markers were used between males and males, males and females, females and males, and females and females, to see if there was a gender-to-gender preference.

3. Results and Discussion

From the results it can be seen that the first hypothesis is supported, i.e. that the gender stereotypes to which Australians are exposed from early childhood and the socially acceptable ways in which genders can act are still dominant; and that women are still the more emotionally expressive gender. As the data shows in Figure 1, women had a higher frequency of use than men in every category of emotional expression. Thus this also supports the second hypothesis.

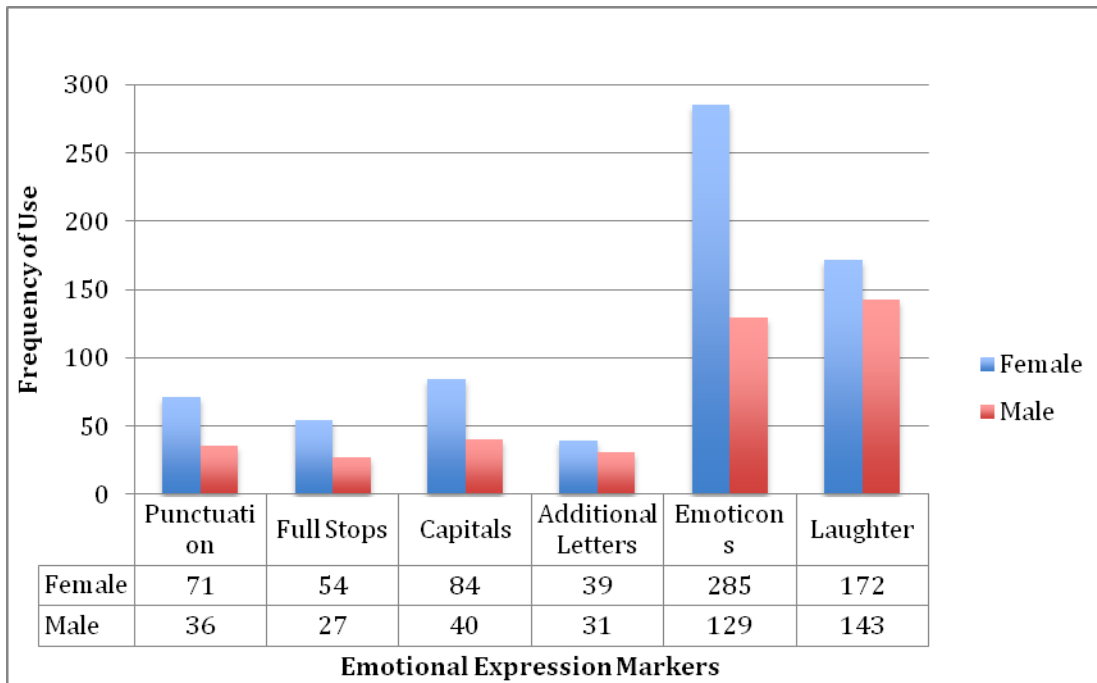


Figure 1: Use of Emotional Expression Markers between Genders

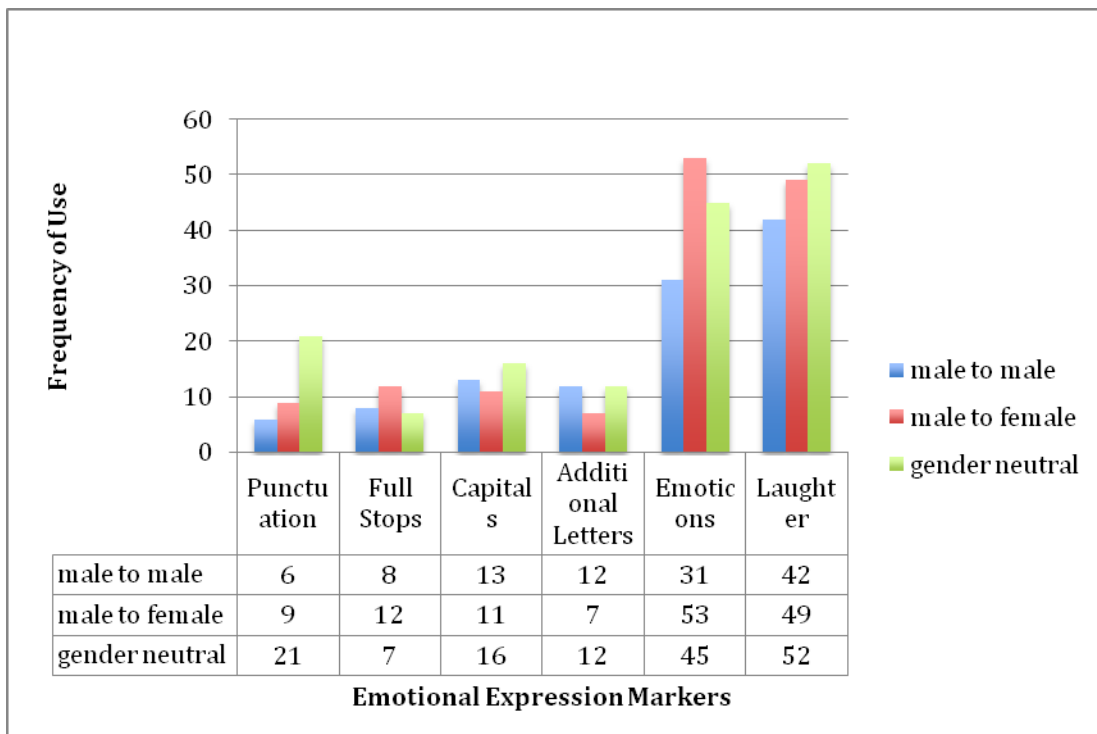


Figure 2: Male-initiated Emotional Expression Markers

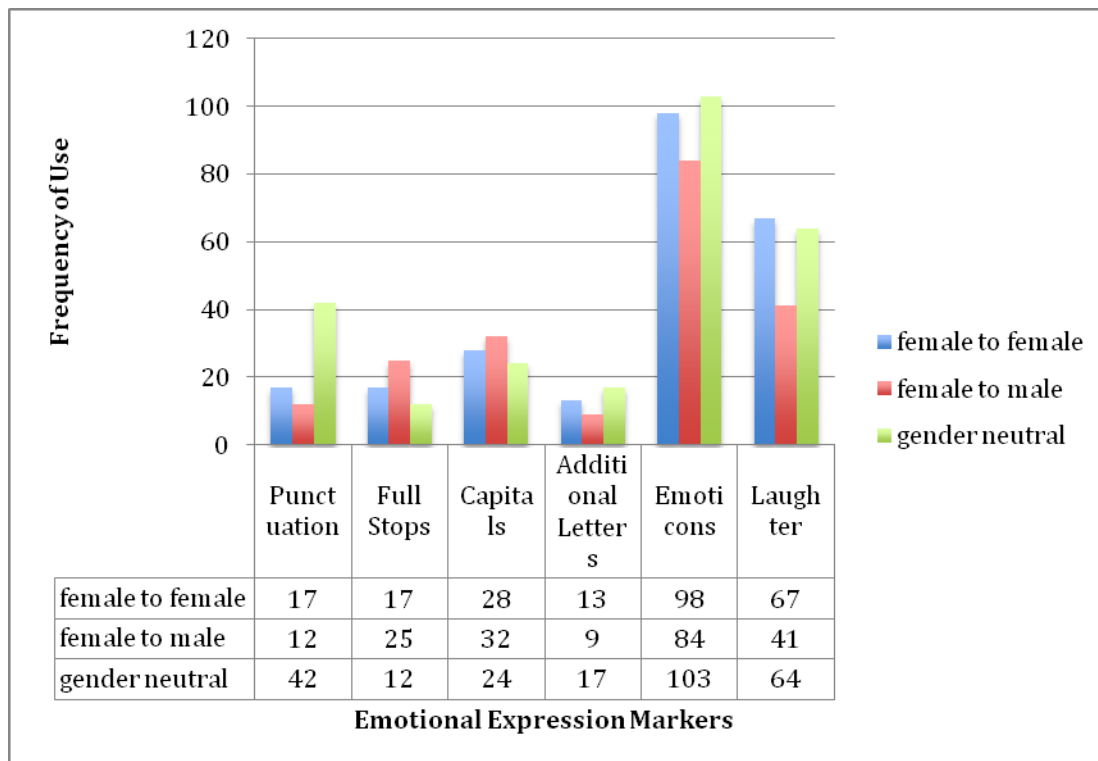


Figure 3: Female-initiated Emotional Expression Markers

3.1 Punctuation markers

Punctuation markers are traditionally seen as grammatical devices. However the punctuation markers that were recorded in the data were not used for grammatical purposes. Instead these punctuation markers were used in greater numbers together (three or more together at one time, e.g. *yes!!!*) to indicate a degree of intensity in what the author had to say. This function was not restricted to one particular emotion: rather it was used as an intensifier of all emotions. On the whole the data in Figure 1 shows us that women use more punctuation markers than do males. However through analysis of the excerpts and in the process of recording the data, it was observed that women used these intensifiers with the expression of more positive emotions rather than with negative ones. These findings support the second hypothesis, i.e. that women make more use of emotional expression markers than do men, to help display their emotions online. The fact that women used punctuation markers more often to express positive emotions can be seen in the following three excerpts:

“Very proud of the Juniors today!! they all did an amazing show and coming 4th and 2nd place in the eisteddfod!!!! So Happy!!!!” (18-year old female’s Facebook status)

“FaceTime love it!!!!” (19-year old female’s Facebook status)

“Gorgeous!!!!!!” (24-year-old female’s comment on friend’s photo)

This observation is consistent with stereotypes on women that see them as more emotionally expressive of positive emotions. The findings of Johnson and Shulmans (1988) show that women were expected to display more positive emotions than men in an other-orientated context.

3.2 Full Stops

As was the case for punctuation markers, full stops are also not limited to grammaticality use. It was observed that the use of numerous full stops in a row served to represent many different things. The first usage, as can be seen in the excerpt below, indicates that the whole story is not written or that there is an unspoken reason for something being the way it is:

“going to bed in a crappy mood..... night everyone” (16-year-old female Facebook status)

The female states that she is “going to bed in a crappy mood” and this is followed by a series of full stops, in this case possibly demonstrating that there is more to the story, a reason for this “crappy mood”, but that she does not feel the need to share the reason for her mood.

In the following excerpt the full stops are being used for a different purpose. In this case the 19-year-old female has two different and seemingly unrelated topics that she wants to discuss with her friend and she therefore uses the full stops as a means of separating the two subjects:

“Guess who's card came in the mail today.... Louis though omg” (19-year-old's post of female friend's wall)

Another function of the full stop is to indicate a pause or a silence in the conversation, or to indicate that an utterance is unfinished. The participants in this study used full stops to realise such a function. According to the data in Figure 1, women use full stops in their speech twice as often as men do.

3.3 Capitals

As shown in Figure 1, women recorded over double the frequency rate of capitalization of words, with women accumulating a frequency of 84 and males of 40. This is very interesting as usually the capitalization of words or phrases has been known to be associated with expressing anger, which is stereotypically an emotion that is perceived to be displayed by men rather than women (Kelly & Hutson-Comeaux 1999). Upon further observation though it is clear that women do not challenge this stereotype, but rather have employed the use of capitalization to enhance emotions such as sadness, happiness and fear all of which are stereotypically more expressed by females. This can be seen below:

“IT WAS SO GOOD THOUGH! I'll have to show you so you can buy it :P” (19-year-old female comment on wall post)

An interesting observation of the data in Figure 3 is that women use capitals more frequently when talking to males than to females.

3.4 Additional Letters

Additional letters may be added to a word to help mark the speaker's tone of voice. The manipulation of letters, such as the repetition of a certain vowel or consonant, can be used creatively in many situations to represent emotional stances such as pondering, disappointment, doubt, frustration, sarcasm, and happiness. Generally its tone is indicated by both the word that is being lengthened and the surrounding words that create the context. In the excerpt below, the word *sweet*, in this context used as a term for 'happiness' has been lengthened to add a positive drawn out tone and emphasises how good the reader thinks the situation is:

"And tonight's news feed is filled with very attractive girls taking very attractive selfies, Sweeeeeet" (17-year-old male Facebook Status)

It can be seen from the data in Figures 2 and 3 that both women and men use this emotional expression marker when talking to people of their own gender, more than with people of the other gender. It was also observed that in many situations, if one person started to use this prosodic feature of lengthening words, then more often than not the recipient would reply using the same feature when wanting to express emotion, as seen in the following, a conversation on wall post between two 20- year-old women:

Female 1: "It was this high school music spinning thing with a light inside it looked cool."

Female 2: "ooooooooohhh cool!"

Female 1: "Its difficult to explain. Obviously

Female 2: "its kaaaay I understand"

Female 1: "shweeeeeet"

3.5 Emoticons

"Emoticons are graphical representations of interpersonal and emotional features, expressed through gesture and facial expressions in face-to-face interactions, in the online setting" (Park 2007). As can be seen from all the data, emoticons are the most frequently used prosodic features to express emotion online. Figure 1 shows that 285 emoticons were used by females and 129 by males, which is at least double to triple the use of all other prosodic features among both genders. This may be the case because emoticons give a visual representation of what the speaker is feeling. If they are happy about a situation, by using the smiley face, ☺, they are able to show without any ambiguity the emotion that they want to express. In addition, there is such a large 'bank' of emoticons, which makes it a very convenient means of expression. The following excerpts show some representations of different emotions using emoticons. (Note that the emoticon in the third excerpt represents a state of being unimpressed) :

"Money in the bank car car brand new :D" (19-year-old male status)

"Smashed my thumb b4 8.00 :(great" (19-year-old male picture caption)

"Soooo over this assignment -__-" (17-year-old female status)

It was interesting to observe that women used more positive emoticons (e.g. smiley faces and laughing faces) when communicating with other females. This may have something to do with face value. Studies have shown that women are concerned about how they are perceived and the positive image that they portray. Using numerous emoticons that are representative of positive emotions may be their way of trying to build up their positive image online. This would be a very significant topic for further research.

3.6 Laughter

As laughter is a big part of face-to-face communication, it is also a big part of online communication. This can be seen in Figures 1, 2 and 3. As with emoticons being created to represent different facial expressions, many different forms have been created to depict laughter online. Three of the most common markers are *haha*, *hehe*, and *lol* (laugh out loud). If a person wants to indicate that they are laughing a lot, they simply repeat the markers numerous times, as can be seen in the following:

“Hahahahahahaha so brilliant” (19-year-old female comment on friends wall post)

“June 5th biatches hehehehehe” (20 year old female comment on friend’s wall post)

Alternatively they can combine markers:

Male: “they show up when you least expect it.”

Female: “Hahahaha * giant troll face *”

Male: “haha lols” (19-year-old male and 18-year-old female conversation)

4. Conclusion

As stated earlier in this paper, a statistically significant body of research has found that women are the more emotionally expressive gender in the realm of face-to-face communication. It has also been found in previous studies that there are certain gender stereotypes associated with particular emotions and these stereotypes have been observed in children as early as pre-school age (Kelley & Hutson-Comeaux 2002). It has also been found that the emotions of happiness, sadness and fear are believed to be more characteristic of women, whereas men are believed to be more characteristically angry. These stereotypes have provided a basis for society to deem what is and is not socially acceptable for males and females in displaying emotions. There was a belief that with the rise of social media and social networking sites, the stereotype that women are the more emotionally expressive of the genders would be weakened due to the relative anonymity that comes with online communication. This paper explored that proposal by examining a group of fifty native Australians and their uses of expressional markers in online communication and hypothesised that regardless of the way in which online social networking has influenced changes in communication, the gender stereotypes to which Australians are exposed from early childhood and the socially acceptable ways in which genders can act will still be dominant, and that women will still be the more emotionally expressive gender. This hypothesis was supported by the data. Although the results indicated that the frequency of use between males and females was close for some of the prosodic expressional markers, on the whole, women were still found to be the more expressive gender.

***Author Note**

Roisin Parkins is currently in her second year of a Bachelor of Arts in Languages and Applied Linguistics, majoring in Japanese Language and Linguistics. She has been interested in languages and cultures since she was a child and is hoping to travel to Japan to use her knowledge for both work and leisure.

References

- Ashmore, R.D., and Del Boca, F.K. 1979. Sex Stereotypes and Implicit Personality Theory: Toward a Cognitive–Social Psychological Conceptualization. *Sex Roles* 5:219–248.
- Birnbaum, D. 1983. Preschoolers’ Stereotypes about Sex Differences in Emotionality: a Reaffirmation. *Journal of Genetic Psychology* 143:139–140.
- Birnbaum, D., Nosanchuk, T., and Croll, W. 1980. Children’s Stereotypes about Sex Differences in Emotionality. *Sex Roles* 6:435– 443.
- Brody, L.R. and Hall, J.A. 2000. Gender, Emotion, and Expression. In *Handbook of Emotions*, ed. by M. Lewis and J.M. Haviland-Jones. 2nd ed. New York: Guilford.
- Campos, J.J., Mumme, D.L., Kermoian, R. and Campos, R.G. 1994. A Functionalist Perspective on the Nature of Emotion. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development* 59:284–303.
- Denham, S.A., Blair, K.A., DeMulder, E., Levitas, J., Sawyer, K., Auerbach-Major, S. and Queenan, P. 2003. Preschoolers’ Emotional Competence: Pathway to Social Competence? *Child Development* 74: 238–256.
- Eisenberg, N. 2001. The Core and Correlates of Affective Social Competence. *Social Development* 10:120–124.
- Halberstadt, A.G., Denham, S.A. and Dunsmore, J.C. 2001. Affective Social Competence. *Social Development* 10:79–119.
- Johnson, J.T. and Shulman, G.A. 1988. More Alike Than Meets the Eye: Perceived Gender Differences in Subjective Experience and its Display. *Sex Roles* 19:67–79.
- Kelly, J.R. and Hutson-Comeaux, S.L. 1999. Gender-Emotion Stereotypes are Context Specific. *Sex Roles* 40:107–120.
- Kelly, J.R. and Hutson-Comeaux, S.L. 2000. The Appropriateness of Emotional Expression in Women and Men: The Double-Bind of Emotion. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality* 15:515–528.
- Kelly, J.R. and Hutson-Comeaux, S.L. 2002. Gender Stereotypes of Emotional Reactions: How we Judge an Emotion as Valid. *Sex Roles* 47:1-10.
- McDowell, D. J., O’Neil, R. and Parke, R. D. 2000. Display Rule Application in a Disappointing Situation and Children’s Emotional Reactivity: Relations with Social Competence. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 46, 306–324.
- McDowell, D.J. and Parke, R.D. 2000. Differential Knowledge of Display Rules for Positive and Negative Emotions: Influences from Parents, Influences on Peers. *Social Development* 9:415–432.
- Park, J. 2007. Interpersonal and Affective Communication in Synchronous Online Discourse. *The Library Quarterly* 77:133-155.
- Perry-Parrish, C. 2011. *Peer Nominations of Emotional Expressivity Among Urban Children: Social and Psychological Correlates*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Saarni, C. 1999. *The Development of Emotional Competence*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Trevino, L.K., Webster, J. and Stein, E.W. 2000. Making Connections: Complementary Influences on Communication Media Choices, Attitudes, and Use. *Organization Science* 11:163-182.