

To email or not to email? For those in love, it's better than leaving a voice message

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In her hit single, Carly Rae Jepsen may have sung, "Here's my number, so call me maybe." But according to a new research study from Indiana University, she might be more successful in finding love if she asked him to send her an email.

The research, which has been accepted for publication in the journal *Computers in Human Behavior*, suggests that, in this digital age, an [email](#) can be more effective in expressing romantic feelings than leaving a voicemail message.

Previous research and conventional wisdom suggested the opposite, that a voicemail message is a more intimate way to connect with others, but that may not be true, particularly among millennials.

"The bottom line is that email is much better when you want to convey some information that you want someone to think about," said one of the authors, Alan R. Dennis, the John T. Chambers Chair of Internet Systems in IU's Kelley School of Business.

Dennis and co-author Taylor M. Wells, an assistant professor of management information systems at California State University-Sacramento, set out to learn more about how we respond emotionally to these newer forms of communication.

Although voicemail, email and texting are part of everyday life, very little is known about how their characteristics influence and distort communication in work and personal settings.

Using psychophysiological measures from 72 college-age people, Dennis and Wells found that people who sent romantic emails were more emotionally aroused and used stronger and more thoughtful language than those who left voicemails.

"When writing romantic emails, senders consciously or subconsciously added more positive content to their messages, perhaps to compensate for the medium's inability to convey vocal tone," Dennis and Wells wrote in the paper, "To Email or Not to Email: The Impact of Media on Psychophysiological Responses and Emotional Content in Utilitarian and Romantic Communication."

"Email enables senders to modify the content as messages are composed to ensure they are crafted to the needs of the situation. Voicemail lacks this feature," they added. "A sender records a voicemail in a single take, and it can be sent or discarded and re-recorded, but not edited. Thus senders engage with email messages longer and may think about the task more deeply than when leaving voicemails. This extra processing may increase arousal."

Previous research suggests that email and text chat are considered poor for communicating emotion. This is believed to be the first research study on how we respond to email using physiological measures.

Dennis and Wells' findings weren't just about pulling heartstrings—the use of email induced more arousing psychophysiological responses than voicemail, regardless of whether the message was utilitarian or romantic. Gender was not found to be a factor and was omitted in the final analysis.

In an interview, Dennis noted that their findings run counter to media naturalness theory, a commonly held evolutionary standard suggesting that the further we get away from face-to-face communications, the less natural and less effective it becomes.

"In this case, we found people adapted," Dennis said. "Email's been in the popular consciousness since the 1990s, and if you look at the new generation of millennials, and that's who we studied, they've grown up with email and text messaging. So it may not be as unnatural a medium as we at first thought.

"There's a lot of theory that says email and other text communications don't really work very well," Dennis added. "We should probably go back and reconsider a lot of the stereotypical assumptions that we hold about email and text messaging that may not hold true when we take a deeper look at how people react physiologically."

The researchers did not see much use of emoticons and emojis in their emails. Rather, they found that when writing emails, subjects took more time to choose their words carefully to make sure the language conveyed the full meaning.

The study also demonstrated that the medium used can shape the content

of the message. Senders of utilitarian messages sent less positive emails than voicemails for the same communication task. However, when composing romantic messages, senders included the most positive and most arousing [emotional content](#) in emails and the least positive and least arousing emotional content in voicemails.

"We expected that using email for romantic [communication](#) would be more frustrating than using voicemail, but our data do not show this," the authors wrote. "There was neither greater emotional arousal nor greater negative emotional valence when using email for romantic tasks versus utilitarian tasks.

"These results taken together suggest that 'the medium is the message' (as famously coined by philosopher Marshall McLuhan in 1964) in a more fundamental way than we have previously understood," they added. "Our results show that the medium changes how message senders feel and what they say."

Dennis warns managers against misinterpreting these findings to suggest that face-to-face meetings, personal phone calls and other direct forms of communications aren't as useful.

"If something isn't really clear and you want to make sure that everyone has the same understanding of what something means, that's best done in phone calls, face-to-face meetings or video conferencing," Dennis said. "You have different cues, and it's also synchronous discussion, as opposed to email, where time goes by before the receiver gets to it."

The research was conducted by placing skin sensors on the subjects' faces to measure muscle movement associated with positive and negative emotion, and on their feet to measure arousal. Subjects were randomly chosen to do voicemail or email first and produce a utilitarian or a romantic message first.

More information: *Computers in Human Behavior*,
[www.sciencedirect.com/science/ ... ii/S0747563215300479](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../ii/S0747563215300479)

Provided by Indiana University

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