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Friendly skies and unfriendly workplace communication: Examining emotion displays on enterprise social media in the aviation industry

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ABSTRACT

Researchers studying communication platforms in organizations (i.e., enterprise social media (ESM)) primarily focus on the implications of these technologies for knowledge sharing. In privileging task-based communication we risk overlooking the emotional aspects of communication inherent in worker interactions. This study investigates employees' communication on ESM in two aviation companies. Interviews with employees ($N = 39$) revealed that they perceived ESM communication as mainly negative, focusing on venting and accusations, and that employees differed in their likelihood of expressing consonant or opposing emotions. Additionally, moderators' presence on the ESM at one organization did not result in fewer emotional displays than on the unmoderated ESM. This research highlights the role of visibility in emotional workplace communication and in emotion cycles among organizational members.

In professional contexts, such as organizational settings, the expressions of emotions are often discouraged and viewed as inappropriate (Kramer & Hess, 2002). However, emotions are also an inherent part of social life and interactions among individuals in the workplace (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987). Both sociologists and organizational communication scholars have developed and used concepts, such as emotional labor (Hochschild, 1979; 1983; Kim & Leach, 2021) and emotion work (Miller et al., 2007) to describe employees' experiences of emotions during work and the expectations for relatively muted displays by individuals (especially in service-oriented professions). Scholars also note how organizational emotions can take different forms in terms of audience (i.e., customers, clients, colleagues), authenticity (i.e., personally felt or performative), and source (i.e., work or non-work related) (see Miller et al., 2007 for more discussion). In this

research, we focus mainly on *emotion with work* by examining how employees perceive emotion expression within an organization and work groups, as well as what kinds of emotions – and associated communication – these expressions evoke for colleagues.

Even though the context of our study is service-oriented and some of the emotions expressed reflect employees' experiences with their customers (similar to Hochschild's (1983) work on the emotional labor of flight attendants), our analysis is not directly concerned with emotional labor or emotion work in service encounters. Rather, our concern is how workers perceive the emotional communication about work, the organization, and work experiences displayed by their colleagues on an internal communication platform. Specifically, this research contributes to communication theory in two interrelated ways: first, by indicating how emotional communication is expressed on enterprise social media (ESM) and perceived by workers, and second, by considering the consequences the visibility of emotional communication on ESM might have for ongoing employee communication.

To date, the effects of social media use on employees' emotional responses remain underexplored (Chu, 2020). While emotion contagion on public social media has attracted scholarly attention (Johnen et al., 2018; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013), far less is known about whether similar processes are present in online communication confined to organizational members. Examining the presence of emotion displays on ESM, and resultant consequences, is important because previous research indicates that workers who perceive ESM as similar to public social media may avoid using the platforms (Treem et al., 2015). Yet, similar to prior studies and conceptualizations of emotion cycles in face-to-face settings (Hareli & Rafaeli, 2008; Scarduzio & Tracy, 2015), our research shows how distinctly negative emotions displayed on ESM trigger consonant, complementary, or dissonant emotional reactions among other employees. We examine the implications these findings have for the relationship between emotional communication by workers and the visibility of communication within organizations.

Emotional communication and enterprise social media use

This research considers how a particular form of collaborative communication technology – ESM – might make work-related emotional communication more visible within an organization, and examines the potential consequences associated with this process. ESM can be defined as web-based platforms enabling information sharing throughout the organization and in group settings by letting employees share posts, comment, like or follow coworkers' posts, as well as make their profile and networks visible to other employees (Leonardi et al., 2013). Examples of these digital platforms are Viva Engage (formerly Yammer), an ESM platform provided by Microsoft; Workplace, provided by Meta; or Chatter, provided by Salesforce. Scholars have demonstrated how these platforms can facilitate a context whereby workers are more aware of colleagues' activity, relationships, and sentiments (Leonardi, 2015) in ways that were not possible through other forms of organizational communication (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017).

Scholars studying ESM have primarily focused on how communication facilitates organizational learning and knowledge sharing (e.g., Sun et al., 2020). Yet, there are reasons to believe communication on ESM also carries meaningful affective elements and emotional expression on ESM may operate in novel ways relative to other communicative contexts. Although ESM are often characterized as potentially useful for workers in

terms of opportunities such as supporting innovation (Leonardi, 2015) or developing social capital (Fulk & Yuan, 2013), a review by van Zoonen and colleagues (2022) indicates that research consistently underscores that ESM wield a dual influence within organizations, yielding both beneficial and adverse consequences and differential experiences for users. This suggests that employees using ESM might have varying encounters with emotional communication, and these experiences might have differential effects on workers.

Regarding the nature of emotional communication on ESM, authors have for long highlighted that public-facing social media are frequently used explicitly for emotional expression (Marwick & boyd, 2010). This type of communication often conveys information about the sender's emotional state, judgments of a particular person or situation, or the intended emotional communication – i.e., the emotion the sender assumes is appropriate for the intended audience or recipient (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). Yet organizational communication scholars have also chronicled how employees are often discouraged from expressing negative emotions or encouraged to mask them in work contexts as such expressions might be perceived as inappropriate (Kramer & Hess, 2002). Moreover, organizations often seek to channel critical communication through formal channels that are not visible to others (i.e., anonymous hotlines, suggestion boxes, feedback to bosses) or informal discussions bound to interpersonal settings. For instance, early studies of email and computer conferencing documented how, despite their bounded, textual nature, these media were still useful for emotional communication (e.g., Haythornthwaite et al., 1995; Rice & Love, 1987). Yet studies focusing on emotion display on internal organization-wide platforms like ESM are less common despite scholars noting the potential for ESM to facilitate affective expression, emotional reflection, or indications of work attitudes (e.g., Kane et al., 2014).

Given that research on emotion expression and related expectations in online organizational settings is scarce, we set forth the following research question:

RQ1: What kind of emotions do employees perceive to be expressed and evoked on ESM?

Visibility of emotional communication at work – Empowering or stifling

Scholars have also considered the conditions under which opportunities for emotional expression by workers might have beneficial or deleterious consequences for individuals and organizations (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Miller et al., 2007). Overall, this work suggests the outcomes of emotional communication are associated with the relative visibility of this communication – i.e., the means by which individuals can express themselves to others, and the means by which workers are exposed to these emotional expressions. One potential benefit of making emotional expression visible is that it often manifests as a form of employee voice and facilitates constructive forms of dissent, resistance, or emotional coping (Garner, 2009). In this study, we see employee voice as one part of emotional communication that may play a central role in emotional expression on organizational platforms.

Employee voice refers to "employees' expression of ideas and opinions regarding their own or organizational interests through formal or informal mechanisms" (Khan et al., 2023, p. 1), and is of particular interest to scholars studying emotions in organizations, as intense emotions often motivate employees to speak up (Morrison, 2011). At the same

time, when workers are able to see others speaking up it can empower others to do the same or serve as a form of advocacy for those reluctant to communicate (Morrison, 2014). Even though social media are effective channels for employee voice, as traditional communicative contexts such as face-to-face meetings at work have reduced and employees' time on social media has increased (Ghani & Malik, 2023), not all emotion displays on ESM can be defined as employee voice. Thus, we use a broader concept of emotional communication on ESM, which may be a form of venting feelings in the moment or celebrating the accomplishments of a peer. Instead, employee voice typically has "the intent to bring about improvement or change" (Morrison, 2014, p. 174). However, some emotional displays on ESM may reflect voicing behaviors, as employee voice can also consist of grievances and complaints, and visibility provided by ESM can make such complaints visible to a wider audience (Khan et al., 2023).

One potential downside of emotional communication not aimed at supporting productive change is that it can be enacted in ways that not only violate organizational norms, but also cause harm, violence, or suppression of ideas among colleagues. This is particularly true regarding expressions of anger and negativity in organizations (Gibson & Callister, 2010). When expressions of anger become widespread, intense emotions can prevent employees from expressing their ideas constructively (Grant, 2013), and this can result in bullying, harassment, or discomfort among workers. Collectively, scholarship indicates that having opportunities for visible emotional communication at work can be empowering and cathartic or discouraging and problematic.

Visibility management of emotional communication

Scholars studying the visibility of emotional communication by workers have presented opposing views on whether individuals seek to communicate feelings widely, and the extent to which colleagues' expressions influence workers (Reychav et al., 2019). Intense emotions at work, whether positive or negative, often drive employees to speak up, yet these emotions also compromise employees' ability to do so constructively (Grant, 2013). Even though public-facing online communication by organizations and individuals is often purposively emotional and intended to grab attention and evoke engagement (Reychav et al., 2019), in highly visible, internal communication, such as ESM, refraining from work-related emotional communication may occur because such communication is not in line with normative expectations about what professional communication entails (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007), or because employees may be fearful of retributions related to emotional communication. Furthermore, authors have suggested that employees may be cautious in communicating expressively as impressions of their online communication may spill over and affect reputational perceptions of their organization (Carr et al., 2023). Even within organizations, it appears that the visibility of communication matters as public messages on ESM typically contain less emotional content than private messages (Reychav et al., 2019).

The consideration of emotional communication on ESM allows us to learn about this form of expression operating in a context of potential high communicative visibility. On ESM, workers can observe or actively participate in interactions previously bound by

location, role, or permissions. The implications of this visibility for emotional expression in organizations are unclear. Arguably, this visibility might result in more or fewer emotional displays because employees may strategically manage communication they decide to conceal or disclose (e.g., Gibbs et al., 2013). Indeed, many workers are reluctant to participate on ESM due to anxiety about how they will be evaluated by others (Treem, 2015). Findings regarding what contexts support emotional communication in the workplace are mixed, with some indications that negative communication may be more common on platforms with less openness and transparency (Reychav et al., 2019), and other work suggesting negative communication thrives in open online contexts (Balaji et al., 2016).

Alternatively, scholars have also indicated that workers value opportunities to express emotions, particularly anger and frustration, to coworkers and managers (Geddes et al., 2020). As angry customers or colleagues can take a heavy toll on employees who must manage their emotional reactions during such encounters, voicing anger or frustration on ESM can be healthy and relieve stress (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995). Managing or suppressing one's emotions at a service encounter may create a need to express these emotions to colleagues in another setting, and social media may operate as channels for employees to vent their frustrations (Holland et al., 2016). In his germinal work in 1959, Goffman introduced the concepts of "backstage" and "frontstage," highlighting the communicative performances or practices people engage in with different audiences. In our case, ESM may provide a backstage for expressing emotions that need to be managed while dealing with customers in the frontstage in the cabin (Hochschild, 1979; Murphy, 2001).

Through this study we want to paint a clearer picture on the role of visibility of ESM and its positive or negative implications related to emotion expression at work. Thus, we pose the following research question:

> RQ2: What is the role of visibility of communication on ESM in relation to employees' emotion expression and the way it is perceived?

Expressed emotions on ESM and resulting emotion cycles

Because ESM are visible to workers and make communication available over time, they might provide a place where such negative emotions can accumulate (Lee & Kim, 2020). The visibility of emotional communication – in terms of reach and persistence of time – presents opportunities for workers to confront colleagues' feelings in new ways. ESM may provide a unique space for emotion cycles (Hareli & Rafaeli, 2008) to emerge. Prior research in face-to-face settings shows that individuals' expressed emotions can ignite emotion cycles in which other employees react to them (1) with consonant emotions (negative emotion expressed by some employees is mimicked by other employees), and (2) with complementary emotions (employees' negative emotions, such as critique or venting trigger complementary negative emotional reactions, such as anxiety in other employees) (Scarduzio & Tracy, 2015). Hareli and Rafaeli (2008) also introduce (3) dissonant emotional reactions (negative emotions, such as accusations, igniting completely different emotions, such as amusement) that can result in making inferences of other employees. It is through these

collective emotion cycles that certain expressed emotions get buffered or amplified (Scarduzio & Tracy, 2015).

Emotion cycles can take new or different forms on ESM compared to organizational face-to-face encounters. With the visibility afforded by these platforms, employees' emotional expressions can potentially reach much larger audiences than in face-to-face settings with limited people involved. On ESM, organizational members from different departments and units can see the messages posted on the platform, and emotion contagion can happen within and across organizational boundaries. The readers of these posts may mimic the emotions expressed in the initial post, react to it with different emotions, or start to avoid reading such posts. These reactions depend on the type and intensity of the emotions experienced by the readers and whether this will lead to an avoidance or approach response to the emotion-inducing message (Nabi, 1999). On ESM, employees can also like, comment on, or forward the initial post with their message attached, mimicking or extending the range of emotions present (Hareli & Rafaeli, 2008). The visibility of communication by users, and by extension, their feelings and emotions available through ESM creates a context for interactions that may facilitate emotional cycles.

On this basis, we examine employees' perceptions of the expressed and evoked emotions on ESM, that is, what type of emotion cycles unfold within organizations. As the third research question, we pose the following:

RQ3: What are the different emotion cycles that unfold in relation to emotion expression on ESM?

Methods

Research sites

We conducted a comparative case study in two European organizations operating in the aviation industry. In both companies, we studied the in-flight services department, interviewing cabin crew (i.e., flight attendants and pursers) and office workers (i.e., customer experience and customer loyalty program employees, in-flight specialists as well as HR, safety, and training managers). Both companies used the same ESM platform, Yammer. Yammer is a social media platform provided by Microsoft and designed for social networking and communication within organizations. Yammer offers users the ability to create profile pages, follow the communication of coworkers, post messages, comment and like the messages of others, share others' posts, and create and join groups (https://adoption.microsoft.com/files/yammer/Yammer%20Lookbook.pdf).   Yammer affords visibility through the number of followers as well as through reposting, commenting, and liking others' posts, which then become visible to followers. In terms of the user interface, the appearance of Yammer is similar to that of Facebook, with a central stream of content in the center of the screen, lists of connections on the right, and lists of groups on the left. Only the users with verified email addresses can join their respective organizational networks on Yammer (Johnson, 2021).

Management at both organizations encouraged the use of Yammer to provide cabin crew members and those supporting the in-flight services with a platform for information sharing, learning, and a sense of community. Furthermore, Yammer served as

a space for interaction between in-flight employees and office workers, allowing all employees to raise issues and ask questions. This is particularly important for management because the in-flight crew rarely meets face-to-face with other organizational members. As such, Yammer functioned as a relational and interactional bridge between the in-flight crew and office workers in both organizations.

We call the first case company Eagle (all organization and employee names are pseudonyms). Eagle is an organization with around 30,000 employees. Their in-flight services, including flight attendants and pursers, consist of approximately 12,000 employees. When in-flight, Yammer was not available to cabin crew, so their use of Yammer was limited to times outside their designated flight hours. Eagle had used Yammer for five years at the time of the study.

The second company, which we label Owl, is an organization with more than 6,000 employees. Owl's in-flight services is the biggest department in the organization, consisting of flight attendants and pursers totaling around 2,000 professionals. At the time of the study, Owl had implemented Yammer five years ago. Like Eagle, cabin crew employees could not log in to Yammer during the flights but could use it between shifts. Table 1 below shows the characteristics of the employees and the organizations.

Data collection

Our data collection proceeded in two phases. First, we familiarized ourselves with Eagle and its operations. Through several discussions with the managers from the in-flight services department, we learned the organizational structure and the role of the ESM platform within the organization. Based on these initial discussions and shaped by our knowledge of scholarship related to ESM use, we developed a semi-structured interview protocol. Based on talks with our organizational liaisons we identified employees in different roles and with different usage patterns within the cabin crew and office workers for the interviews. The sample included cabin crew (pursers and flight attendants), office personnel (product owners and experts, e.g., loyalty program managers, HR employees), management, and moderators. Interviews were not specifically focused on emotional communication, but instead included questions about ESM use, perceptions of colleagues' ESM use, and any individual and organizational consequences of ESM. The goal was to gather comparable data across workers, while allowing workers to share rich, individual experiences.

At Eagle, they compiled a list of 35 potential interviewees, and 23 agreed and participated in an interview during the summer and fall of 2019. All research participants received consent forms and information on the use of the research data in written form. One of the authors and a field researcher conducted the interviews in the interviewees' native language and they lasted on average 50 minutes (ranging from 32 to 66 minutes). Interviews were conducted face-to-face at Eagle's offices, the crew service hub at the airport, or digitally through video calls and audio recorded. The authors continuously discussed the initial themes that surfaced across interviews regarding ESM use at Eagle.

Second, while still collecting the interviews at Eagle, we secured another research site within the same industry, Owl, which matched our case at Eagle on several key

Table 1. Organizations and the participants ($N = 39$).

Participant	Gender	Work environment	Age	Tenure (years)
Eagle				
E1	Male	Cabin	46–55	11–20
E2	Female	Office	26–35	6–10
E3	Female	Office	46–55	20+
E4	Female	Office	55+	20+
E5	Female	Office	36–45	11–20
E6	Female	Office	55+	20+
E7	Female	Cabin	26–35	0–5
E8	Male	Cabin	36–45	20+
E9	Female	Cabin	36–45	11–20
E10	Female	Cabin	46–55	0–5
E11	Female	Cabin	36–45	11–20
E12	Female	Office	36–45	11–20
E13	Female	Office	36–45	11–20
E14	Female	Cabin	25–35	11–20
E15	Male	Office	46–55	20+
E16	Female	Cabin	46–55	11–20
E17	Female	Office	55+	20+
E18	Female	Cabin	25–35	0–5
E19	Male	Cabin	25–35	6–10
E20	Female	Cabin	36–45	11–20
E21	Female	Cabin	25–35	0–5
E22	Male	Office	55+	20+
E23	Female	Cabin	35–55	20+
Owl				
O1	Male	Cabin	55+	20+
O2	Female	Cabin	36–45	11–20
O3	Male	Office	36–45	0–5
O4	Female	Cabin	36–45	11–20
O5	Female	Cabin	36–45	0–5
O6	Female	Cabin	36–45	11–20
O7	Female	Office	46–55	20+
O8	Female	Cabin	55+	20+
O9	Female	Cabin	55+	20+
O10	Female	Office	55+	20+
O11	Female	Office	36–45	0–5
O12	Female	Office	36–45	20+
O13	Female	Office	46–55	20+
O14	Female	Cabin	55+	20+
O15	Female	Cabin	25–35	0–5
O16	Female	Office	46–55	0–5

dimensions. Owl had implemented the same ESM platform for the same reasons as Eagle; the users of the platform operated in the same job roles with similar task descriptions; and even the benefits and challenges related to the communication patterns on the ESM platform articulated by management were similar for both organizations. The only clear distinction between how Eagle and Owl implemented their ESM was that Eagle used moderators, which was not the case at Owl. Eagle had assigned moderators to curate the content on the platform and match users and content, whereas at Owl the discussions on the platform were not moderated by assigned employees. Content moderation was in the formal task descriptions of internal communication employees recruited to facilitate the efficient communication between the ground (e.g., offices) and inflight departments (e.g., cabin crew). However, content moderation was not a full-time job, as moderators often engaged in other communication roles or operated as flight attendants in the remaining time.

Through the same procedure of first getting to know the organization through several informal conversations with the managers, we started collecting interview data in the winter and spring of 2020 at Owl. To allow for comparison, the semi-structured interview protocol at Owl was identical to that used at Eagle, except for additional questions regarding the lack of moderators. With the help of organizational liaisons, we identified similar target groups of interviewees as in Eagle and invited employees from various roles to participate. We got an email list of 23 potential interviewees and 16 of the contacted employees responded positively to our interview invitation. Again, all participants received consent forms and information on the use of the research data in written form. One of the authors and a field researcher conducted the interviews at Owl in interviewees' native language. The interviews lasted on average 64 minutes (ranging from 53 to 84 minutes per interview). Interviews were conducted face-to-face at Owl's offices or through video calls and audio recorded.

Data analysis

After completing 39 interviews, all data were transcribed verbatim resulting in 714 pages of text (in 12pt font). We conducted a comparative analysis (e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1998) by reading and categorizing the data in three linked sub-processes. Analysis started with a stage of immersion, where the first author reviewed all the data and engaged in a process of memo writing that sought to identify aspects of the data that were prominent, patterned, unusual, distinct, or unexpected. It was during this early stage that emotions quickly surfaced as one of the main themes among employees' comments about experiences with the respective ESMs at Eagle and Owl. Following a discussion about the memos among the researchers, the first two authors shifted to open coding that included a line-by-line analysis of the two datasets flagging each instance where the respondents talked about their emotions related to ESM or the emotional displays on the platform. These instances served as context units and reduced the data to manageable portions. We stayed close to the language of our research participants, using "informant-centric" codes (Gioia et al., 2013), such as "tone of messages', "frustration," "venting," and "misinterpretation." Rereading the data extracts in their contexts helped in explicating the properties of each code. We identified negative communication from interview accounts through focusing on such words as "negative," "complaints," "hostile" and "verbal attack." However, negative communication was not only about specific messages, but it was related to the ways employees described the overall content of ESM communication, such as "platform pollution," or feelings related to social interaction on ESM, such as "being in the purgatory."

Second, the first author engaged in axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) by merging the two datasets and comparing the codes by looking for similarities and contrasting them, leading to refining the codes and formulation of first and second-order themes. This analysis focused on how participants referred to the expressed emotions and their consequences (such as their feelings about the ESM channel and the posts, reactions to ESM posts and toward their colleagues, as well as how the dynamics of emotions evolved on ESM). The findings were shared and refined again with the other two researchers. The codes in this phase were more "research-centric" (Gioia et al., 2013) and informed by our emerging theoretical interest in emotion dynamics and cycles

Table 2. Coding structure of the interview data.

	First-level descriptive codes	Second-level categories	Third-level conceptualizations
RQ1	Inappropriate communication Aggressive tone of messages Bullying	Expressed emotions on ESM perceived as negative	Reason for negativity on ESM: Lack of ESM skills
	Venting frustrations Speaking up	Expressed emotions on ESM perceived as neutral/similar to face-to-face communication	Reason for negativity on ESM: Communication culture
RQ2	Message threading on ESM Engagement with messages (likes, comments) Tagging others in messages	Material features of ESM increasing the visibility of negative communication	Results in accentuating negativity Results in building support and getting responses to questions
RQ3	Irritated post on ESM evoking irritation	Consonant emotional reaction	Results in emotion mimicking/ negativity contagion
	Critique on ESM evoking anxiety Complaints triggering feelings of suppression	Complementary emotional reaction	
	Venting on ESM evoking embarrassment Venting on ESM evoking entertainment	Dissonant emotional reaction	Results in making inferences of others

and communication visibility. As the coding continued, we systematically compared these codes across the two cases.

Third, the researchers finalized the analysis by distilling the second-order codes to overarching aggregate dimensions and "stepping-up in abstractness," which helped finalize the data structure (Gioia et al., 2013). The goal was not to develop a predictive model of emotional communication on ESM, but rather to seek a representation of how data and dynamics at Eagle and Owl inform our understanding of the communication of emotions in an organizational context, the role the visibility of an ESM has on this communication, and the consequences this communication has for organizational life. Table 2 shows our coding structure and how we moved from first-level codes to higher-level conceptualizations.

Finally, upon completing the analysis the authors conducted member reflections (Tracy, 2020) by presenting the results and interpretations in both case organizations to ensure the participants recognized the findings as authentic and truthful. To present data in the findings section we anonymized interviewees with codes consisting of a letter E (Eagle) or O (Owl) and a number, and we translated the relevant transcriptions.

Findings

RQ1: Emotion expression on ESM

Employees from both organizations perceived that emotions were commonly displayed on ESM, and according to their accounts, emotions were particularly prevalent within the in-flight communities. Employees at both Eagle and Owl typically described the content on ESM as laden with emotions or heated discussion, and 35 out of 39 interviewees

described the communication within the in-flight community on ESM as more negative than positive in tone and content. One of the office employees at Eagle described it as follows: "I think the inflight services have huge engagement. I like that, it gives a warm feeling and invites new engagement. But what I find is a pity is that engagement is often also negative" (E5). Another cabin crew member at Eagle described the negativity in stronger terms as "platform pollution," and elaborated, " … one or two years ago, the emotions were running so incredibly high within the inflight staff, especially cabin crew, that on Yammer you, uh, saw quite some outliers that were really, uh, well, platform-pollution" (E20). Employees did not express resistance to using ESM in a technical or material sense (i.e., they did not have problems using the platform). Instead, they noted disappointment with the nature of the feelings expressed by coworkers on Yammer.

Similarly, research participants at Owl reported that discussions on ESM contained a lot of negative emotions. One of the office employees described the balance between positive and negative comments as follows: "There's not much anything positive brought up. It is extremely rare to get compliments, and this probably should not be the main purpose of it – but I can't believe that this (critiquing and finding others' mistakes) should be the purpose of it either" (O3). Workers were also surprised by the multitude of negative emotions displayed on ESM even though the platform was not anonymous. The same office employee (O3) described that in his view the negative emotions were related to the type of communication people felt was appropriate for public social media, and was surprised that such negative expressions were used on a non-anonymous ESM platform:

> … online you can comment anonymously, but here, well the tone is not exactly the same, but here (on Yammer) they often write in a very unpleasant tone, too, with their own names. This kind of arrogance, that you can write stuff and not even realize that maybe this shouldn't be written. People have lost their sensibility (on what can be written on ESM).

Interestingly, the in-flight employees perceived the tone and emotional content of the posts on ESM somewhat differently than the office employees in the interviews. Members of the in-flight crew at Owl described the ESM posts as very similar to the discussion "up in the sky" (O7). Six out of nine cabin crew members at Owl defended the tone of the discussion, saying explicitly that the comments on ESM are never personal or that there is no "trashing against other people" (O1). They also felt that venting on the platform was important for the in-flight employees. A purser at Owl (O2) described:

> The goal of our Yammer group is to get peer support and to be able to also vent these bad feelings we really can't talk during the flights, because passengers hear us. So then (on ESM) we can say out loud if there's anything … I wouldn't call it negative but … it's a good channel to vent your thoughts.

For individuals like this employee, the ability to share emotions and feelings on the ESM provided a valuable outlet. Similarly, in-flight employees at Eagle reflected on how cabin crew members shared emotions openly to each other whereas this was not necessarily the case with office employees:

> "We [in the cabin crew] are very emotion-driven. It is a feminine environment. Everything can be discussed. Also bluntly, and disappointment and incomprehension. Flying colleagues

put everything on it [ESM], but behind the scenes, on the ground we are actually a more political organization" (E9).

Accordingly, the office employees had very different views on how the discussions evolved on ESM and the tone and content of the discussions. An office employee at Eagle (E14) described the communication between in-flight crew and office employees on Yammer as one-sided negative critique, and office employees at Owl described Yammer as "a throw-up channel" (O8) and said that " … at its worst, there is blaming against a particular person, or part of the department, or management … people who are doing their jobs are called by names, of being incapable or imbecile … that's what it's like at its worst." Another office employee (O3) at Owl illustrated that when the discussion on ESM gets heated "people start calling names" and "covertly bully others in between the lines." At Eagle, similar accounts prevailed, as employees saw colleagues being "maligned" on ESM:

> We also had one male, a one-stripe (referring to the rank). He was uh very, well, new. He was also very active. But he is not anymore, because he was completely maligned, it was really sad to see but he always was very outspoken in his opinions (E18).

While the cabin crew members articulated that the tone of communication was an organizational culture issue and that office employees were more "political" in their expressions than the cabin crew who discussed "everything bluntly" (E9), office employees' emphasized that the negative tone in ESM posts resulted from some of the cabin crew members' lack of writing and social media skills. The office employees highlighted that the "defamatory and inappropriate" (O12) tone of communication was typical only on ESM and not for example in customer service situations, and thus, related to a lack of online communication skills: "These same people are customer service professionals and pleasant and cordial people but they cannot write. [–] It is social media unskillfulness" (O10). Such accounts emphasize how employees perceived that not all their colleagues adjusted their communication appropriately to a visible, internal communication platform, but lacked the skills to express emotions constructively on ESM.

According to employees' accounts, negative emotions ran high on both organizations' ESM. Employees typically reported that the ESM posts were critical or unpleasant in tone, but 22 out of 39 interviewees described the content in even stronger terms, such as discussions being "cruel" or "aggressive," involving "negative spirals" and "mobilizing allies," and referenced "bullying, fighting and personal attacks" between colleagues occurring on ESM. However, it was more often office employees who saw the negative tone of the messages as a problem compared to the in-flight employees.

RQ2: Emotional expression and visibility management

Research participants explicitly noted that the visibility of emotional expressions, particularly negative communication, increased the likelihood of others sharing similar communication such that emotional communication was accentuated and magnified. Employees systematically reported that negative issues were quickly accompanied by comments and likes from other users – and received far more engagement than

benign, neutral communication. One employee at Owl described: "If you are really … extremely bitchy and witty, a wordsmith, and you are hiddenly mean, that's what gets the most likes" (O8). Another employee reflected that the comments that are the "most daring" get the most likes and that liking makes this kind of commenting competitive, which they described as "worrisome" (O12).

According to employees in both organizations, the engagement with negative communication (i.e., likes and comments) had the material effect of making the original posts more visible on the ESM feed. Additionally, the way the comments were threaded on ESM made it difficult to read others' comments, resulting in commenting behavior where the same problems were taken up repeatedly, accentuating the negativity of the original post, and making subsequent negative comments more visible through replication. As a result, what was most visible to employees using the ESM was negative communication, and other workers' interaction with, and about, that negative communication.

The practice of tagging other members within or across departments was also a way to increase the visibility of negative ESM posts. Tags were often used by those who posted content, or those commenting on an original post, to specifically call out another worker who had not responded to content. According to the employees, linking someone's name (and ESM profile) to the post or comment by tagging them ensured better visibility of the posts on ESM than those that did not include tags:

> Some questions may disappear in the feed if you haven't tagged anyone to those posts, because, as there are almost 7,000 employees in our organization so sometimes there are so many messages that some of them just sink (in the feed) (O11).

The practice of tagging also evoked various emotions among employees who saw it either as an "official" and good way to get visibility to an issue, or as an "absurd" way to get someone monitoring whether the question is responded to. It appeared that tagging was used as a mechanism to add visibility to the discussion and ensure that the problems and critiques presented on ESM were seen by the right people and addressed. Especially cabin crew members argued that tagging on ESM was mainly done to build support for ideas and "officially" get responses to questions (O5). However, other employees at Owl described how tagging is a form of control that was experienced negatively:

> The way people use the tagging feature … for example by tagging me and our CEO to their question … I think that is misuse of Yammer, you just want to have visibility for your own question, you force someone to respond and that someone is monitoring your response. This is just absurd. (O3)

Employees using the ESM noticed efforts by colleagues to make certain communication visible, had distinct emotional reactions to these practices, and developed opinions about others based on these behaviors.

The role of content moderation

Finally, and a separate mechanism compared to tagging, the role of content moderation in influencing emotional communication was potentially different in the two organizations because Eagle had official moderators whereas at Owl, no official moderators were assigned. For users at Owl, the visibility of communication served as a clear rationale for the need of moderators for helping temper the emotional

expressions. One interviewee (O3) commented: "If nothing is done, it is unfortunate, but … things just tend to get worse unless they are intervened. … in this situation, I don't expect the behavior (on ESM) to change without an intervention." There was a hope that moderators could help reduce the harm of visible negative communication.

Yet despite having official moderators at Eagle who were empowered to intervene, individuals in these roles rarely acted in a manner that would reduce the visibility of emotional communication. Moderators noted significant reluctance to interfere with the communication of coworkers. As one moderator explained (E4): "Of course you don't want to silence the platform. Sometimes you're also accused of censorship. […]. As a moderator we can remove posts from someone, but I find that too invasive." For moderators at Eagle, the widespread visibility of communication was the main reason why they resisted being too active in intervening; moderators were hesitant to appear to censor employees' expressions in such a visible and public manner. The result was that similar communication dynamics emerged at Owl, without official moderators, and Eagle, with official moderators.

RQ3: Emotion cycles and perceived consequences

The research participants not only reflected on the emotional communication in the content on ESM (i.e., posts and comments) but also on how encountering that communication made them feel. Specifically, we identified three types of emotion cycles from employees' accounts: (1) consonant emotional reaction, (2) complementary emotional reaction, and (3) dissonant emotional reaction, resulting in drawing inferences from others' emotions.

First, employees perceived that the emotional content displayed on ESM evoked consonant emotions. Interviewees reported becoming irritated when a colleagues' critique posted on the ESM received no response. Employees at Owl also reported that they supported their colleagues' frustrations and felt that it was good to get these feelings visible to wider audiences in the organization. One employee explained these negative expressions as a means to "get one's voice heard" and saw the negative discussions as "important in showing how things are" (O16). In such instances these consonant emotion cycles support the original negative emotion and trigger similar irritated or vigorous emotions.

Second, at times employees' descriptions of the emotions evoked by the negative ESM posts complemented the original emotions displayed in these posts. For example, colleagues' negative emotions expressed on ESM produced corresponding negative emotions such as anxiety and a desire to leave the platform. An employee at Eagle (E5) illustrated: " … you get people that will be discouraged to go to the platform to discuss anything because they think it is a negative whiny platform." Similarly, employees at Owl described how they cannot go to Yammer anymore, and "need to have a break" (O3) and accounted how they do not want to be on Yammer often by noting "I feel that the people there suppress me" (O10). Expressed negative emotions on ESM, which according to some employees, were meant "only" for venting or a call for action, triggered emotions of anxiety and burnout, especially among the office employees responsible for responding to these messages. One office employee at Owl described his situation as follows:

> Last year I was actually … pretty exhausted because of all the Yammer critique and trashing and bullying, and I would have probably taken sick leave because of it, if I hadn't had a break that enabled me to stay away from it, because it was really horrible to read every day a hundred messages on how bad you are and how you can't do your job (O3).

An office employee at Eagle (E5) described the feelings negative communication triggers very similarly: "Because Yammer also has a lot of negativity and it is very personal, [–], I have suffered, especially in the beginning I even had sleepless nights because of it." This response demonstrates the ways negative emotions expressed on the ESM were subsequently embodied and enacted by some individuals with complementary negative emotions.

The emotion cycle at play when negative emotions evoked consonant or complementary negative feelings reflects aspects of emotion contagion or emotion mimicking. Employees reported how reading others' angry comments on Yammer made them angry themselves. They also described negative emotion displays as "draining their energy" (O12) or "hurting them" (O4). Similar to their own negative or complementing reactions to negative ESM posts, interviewees described how they saw emotion contagion occurring between colleagues who read and replied to others' messages and described this as the "snowball effect of negativity" (E15). Individuals' ease of visible communication on the ESM meant that emotional discussions could grow quickly and garner widespread participation.

Third, emotions expressed on ESM could also evoke completely different, dissonant emotions related to other employees. Seeing how coworkers tagged other people higher up in the organizational structure to their negative ESM posts to "make things happen" triggered embarrassment in other employees. One office employee at Owl (O10) described: " … it would be weird if our CEO actually responded to all those 'we ran out of Cokes on our flight' comments … many people always tag him there … in all discussions they include the management (by tagging)." In these cases the expression of emotion directed at others in the organization was perceived as inappropriate, unprofessional, or simply odd.

Along with embarrassment, negativity could also trigger opposite emotions among colleagues. Some employees at Eagle called the observation of negative discussions "fascinating" or "amusing" and other employees noted that it was the negativity that engaged and attracted people on the platform: "It is like going to the movies. If everything goes well, it is just not interesting" (E19). One employee at Eagle (E13) noted how it is sometimes exciting to enter Yammer to read the posts for entertainment, but that the enjoyment quickly wears off and negativity sinks in: "Sometimes it is quite to my amusement. You know, I open it I think let's see what is going on. But then I am three posts in and I think 'nevermind' I am going to do something else. It is pretty negative. It is not something that cheers you up." Workers had to balance their natural curiosity with the realization that confronting this information was not likely to benefit them emotionally.

At Owl, the negative posts on ESM evoked other emotions especially among coworkers across departments, and outside the in-flight unit. According to the in-flight office employees at Owl, who regularly collaborated with employees from different departments, the negative discussions and "cat fights" (O8) on their department's ESM channel attracted other employees just for entertainment. Several office employees at Owl mentioned how employees within and across units were amused by these strong emotional displays and how negative emotions displayed were entertaining to them. An office employee (O16) added:

> … they (employees from another department) say that they take the popcorn out and follow our department's ESM channel on Friday nights when a discussion starts and say it's the best entertainment. Then they pity us, in a way, that we are there in purgatory, but no one comes and helps us [gives a laugh].

Finally, the emotion cycles associated with negative expressions of emotion on ESM often led employees to make inferences regarding the motives and behavior of their coworkers, who posted negative comments on ESM. Some office employees made inferences about their in-flight colleagues regarding their job status and security and felt that being able to express their negative thoughts "without any filters" was a consequence of these employees feeling "too secure about their jobs." Similarly, at Eagle, an employee high up in the organization (E6) noted: "The people really want to work at Eagle, but regardless of that fact they do dirty their own nest a lot. That is an interesting phenomenon." These comments demonstrated that organizational members used the visible emotional expressions of colleagues posting on the ESM to make broad evaluations of those communicators beyond the content of the post. Such emotion displays had consequences on employees' behavior on ESM and beyond in face-to-face situations at work.

Discussion

Our investigation reveals a surprising undercurrent of emotional dynamics within organizational communication on ESM, challenging the assumption that ESM is predominantly a vehicle for task-based interactions facilitating organizational learning and innovation (e.g., Leonardi, 2015). Negative emotions were widely expressed on internal, visible, and non-anonymous social media platforms. This is counter to findings from research that suggested that employees' work-related communication on (public) social media is predominantly neutral, with workers refraining from expressing overly positive or negative emotions (van Zoonen et al., 2016). Moreover, the research presented here demonstrates these emotion dynamics have consequences for organizing, by leading employees to make inferences about colleagues. Overall, the communication on the ESM provoked a wide variety of emotions among organizational members including anxiety, frustration, embarrassment, and entertainment.

The findings indicated no discernable difference in the level of emotional communication present on the ESM with active moderators (Eagle) and the ESM without moderation (Owl), despite expectations that moderators would deter problematic communication. Our findings give more nuance to prior research suggesting that moderation helps mitigate inappropriate expressions exceeding professional norms and that moderation is needed for employees to voice their concerns on ESM (Abdulgalimov et al., 2020). Despite the potential regulation of messages, the consistency and ubiquity of emotional communication suggests that this form of communication is meaningful to organizational members and occuring on ESM.

Theoretical implications

The results indicate that the communication content on ESM was mostly considered negative in tone in both studied organizations. Prior research on emotions in organizations has mainly focused on positive affect (Neff et al., 2014) on an individual level,

but far less is known about negative emotion dynamics on an organizational level (Maitlis & Ozcelik, 2004), even though some evidence exists that negative emotions can have far-reaching consequences, such as counter-productive work behavior (Shockley et al., 2012). Our study contributes to this gap by showing how employees perceive and respond to negative emotional displays on an ESM platform and the consequences this has for ongoing organizing.

Previous scholarship has heralded different ways ESM might support beneficial relationships (Fulk & Yuan, 2013) or facilitate greater knowledge sharing (Leonardi, 2015) across organizational boundaries. However, the findings at Owl and Eagle demonstrate ways that an ESM may solidify or amplify divides between organizational roles. The visible communication on the ESM served as a material reification of differences between the flight crew and office workers. Moreover, because the engagement on the ESM was up to the employees, office workers often opted to avoid this communication. By offering employees a means of choosing what types of communication from organizational members they view and what they avoid, ESM may facilitate forms of polarization of communication within organizations. This type of polarization through self-selection of online content exposure is similar to what is seen in political arenas on public social media (Reinig et al., 2023). In the future, scholars should explore in more detail what, aside from emotional communication, might lead to polarization of communication behaviors on ESM.

Researchers of employee voice have noted that the visibility of workers' communication may deter individuals from voicing negative and critical messages (Gossett & Kilker, 2006; Mao & DeAndrea, 2019). Indeed, some employees at Eagle and Owl were surprised that their colleagues posted negative comments with their names visible to everyone. Yet the volume and salience of emotional communication indicate many workers viewed the ESM as more empowering than stifling. Previous research has shown that the public, visible nature of digital communication can serve as a context for employees to express candid, critical views of their organization, although that communication is often expressed anonymously (Garner, 2009; Gossett & Kilker, 2006), and that anonymity may be needed for these platforms to be useful for employee voice (Abdulgalimov et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2023). Our findings emphasize that employees can see ESM, such as Yammer, similarly to public-facing social media and therefore feel empowered to share emotional, pointed, and critical communication about their organization and other workers even non-anonymously.

The results of this study can help us problematize the concept of employee voice by indicating that the same visibility that affords criticism of organizational leaders is also likely to facilitate workers' criticisms of each other. This points to a potential dark side associated with the visibility of ESM and empowered employee voices. Organizational research has documented the corrosive effect that bullying, cruelty, or meanness can have within organizations and the implications these behaviors can have for organizational culture and job performance (Sutton, 2007). However, negative actions such as insults, slights, and microaggressions are often enacted in isolated, interpersonal contexts. When negativity is expressed in more visible ways, such as on ESM and non-anonymously, it potentially has a broader impact beyond the feelings of an individual who may be targeted in an interaction. Moreover, the existence of, and support for, a platform that allows such expressions risks sending a tacit signal to workers that this type of interaction is tolerated.

Another way that ESM might alter our understanding of employee voice is that the visibility of communication on the platform flattens the direction of communication such that it is accessible to workers across roles and levels at the same time. Traditionally, employee voice refers to communication that intends to facilitate change and that is directed upward (i.e., meant for those in a higher organizational position) (Morrison, 2014). Though much of the messages on ESM meet these criteria, the emotional communication commonly extends well beyond these boundaries in both organizations. Emotional content on the ESM often represented venting, personal slights, or sharing of frustrations, and workers would add on to discussions without any clear goals or desired solutions. Additionally, though this communication was visible to senior organizational members, the comments note that the intended audience for messages was often peers and not more senior organizational members. This suggests that employee voice may be a more collective, horizontal endeavor than previous literature has assumed, especially when voicing behaviors start accumulating on communication platforms affording organization-wide visibility.

At the same time, the findings indicate how the visibility of ESM communication can facilitate the development of emotion cycles in organizations. Visibility, specifically the reach of ESM posts and their persistence over time, can amplify the displayed emotions on ESM and stifle other emotions as the negative messages thread and get reactions from colleagues. This dynamic is consistent with findings that indicate that engagement typically grows on their outer edges in online discussions as users focus on the most recent comments in the threads (Hewitt, 2003). Similarly, social media platform mechanisms that afford visibility, such as reposting, can amplify information shared on the platform (Marwick & boyd, 2010). Our research contributes to the study of emotion cycles, largely studied in face-to-face contexts (e.g., Scarduzio & Tracy, 2015), by showing how visibility afforded by ESM amplifies emotion cycles to spread across departmental boundaries. Inferences employees make based on their colleagues' negative emotion displays on ESM can scale up and get far more attention than emotion cycles between individuals communicating in person.

The findings also show how differences in emotion expectations, shaped by differences in organizational roles (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987), may present challenges in a context where communication is equally accessible and visible to a broader organizational audience. For instance, employees noted that the negative emotional expressions of the in-flight crew were unsurprising to other flight crew members who often engaged in similar communication in person with each other. However, such forms of emotional communication were surprising and distressing to office workers not accustomed to negative expressions from colleagues. For in-flight employees, ESM was a backstage to vent frustrations that could not be displayed at the frontstage with the customers (Goffman, 1959) whereas office workers perceived ESM as a frontstage that the whole organization could access. Thus, while the in-flight employees viewed the ESM as an empowering platform to support emotional communication and open and candid organizational culture, the office workers viewed it as a burdensome responsibility to engage in communication that was not skillful and which they would rather avoid. Hence, rather than bridging different organizational domains, the nature of the communication that became visible accentuated fundamental differences between in-flight and office employees, creating a polarized communication environment. These findings indicate that

creating opportunities for visible communication across organizational roles without efforts to socialize individuals to the communication customary to different users might result in communication breakdowns across groups. Relatedly, the prevalence of emotional expressions on the ESM serves as a call to revisit theories regarding what constitutes "professional" communication in contemporary workplaces (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007), and whether expectations differ across organizational communication platforms and employees. This study indicates that workers differed in whether they viewed ESM as a space for candid emotional expression, similar to communication on other social media, or whether that type of communication did not belong in an organizational setting.

Finally, our study contributes to the emerging theory of communication visibility (Treem et al., 2020) by highlighting the role of various audiences and onlookers related to emotion cycles and consequences. The workers' comments that the act of viewing others' communication evoked strong emotions and prompted inferences regarding the motivations and intent of coworkers demonstrates the significance of the visibility associated with platforms such as ESM. Employees may communicate on an ESM with a very specific audience in mind. Still, the actual potential audience includes "third parties" or "onlookers" (Sergeeva et al., 2017) who evaluate coworkers and the organization based on emotion displayed on ESM. Some employees explicitly stated they were thinking about these onlookers. They considered what kind of inferences others made about colleagues who posted emotional content on ESM. However, other employees who used these platforms did not explicitly note being aware of these onlookers or did not take their potential inferences into account. This suggests that some organizational members are more strategic and purposeful in their communication of emotions on ESM, and the visibility provided by the platform than others.

Practical implications

Although the Yammer team at Eagle was applauded for their efforts in "policing" the platform and matching users and content, clearly, they were unable or unwilling to mitigate emotion-laden content that populated the platform. At Owl, workers seemed to view content moderation as the panacea to all problems on Yammer, despite our data clearly showing that this enthusiasm about the role of moderators did little to lessen the negativity expressed among workers. The findings suggest that while the moderators had a mandate to interfere in the case of inappropriate content (e.g., personal attacks or misinformation), interventions were unlikely, for instance, out of a fear of being accused of censorship. Overall, the results suggest that the ESM moderators had little impact on emotion expression on ESM.

The findings also suggest that organizations should be careful what they wish for when encouraging ESM use to empower workers to voice candid, unfiltered opinions. While the management envisioned the ESM to support knowledge sharing and communication across organizational boundaries, ESM highlighted various frustrations, communal venting, and personal gripes. When implementing ESM, management often touts the flexibility and openness of the platform and encourages workers to use the technology in ways they find personally beneficial. The findings in this study imply that undirected communication, particularly in digital spaces, can easily develop negative momentum.

Organizations should consider appropriate and effective ways to prevent problematic content on ESM without stifling healthy expressions of employee voice.

Limitations and future research

Even though we were able to compare our findings across two different organizational sites, this work still has limitations to its generalizability. The distinct nature of the aviation industry, encompassing its unique operational dynamics (Hochschild, 1983; Murphy, 2001) and the utilization of ESM, likely influenced employees' readiness to publicly express negative emotions through this platform. The specific ways in which ESM were used can be seen as emblematic of the nuanced service dynamic existing between the cabin crew and office employees, where the latter are tasked with providing dedicated support to their flying counterparts and facilitating in-flight services. This unique service relationship likely contributes to the differential interpretation of office employees in publicly manifested (negative) emotions on ESM. Future research needs to examine emotion displays and cycles in other types of organizational settings. Further research is also needed to test how emotional communication may vary across employee groups and professional subcultures and what is considered professional communication in ESM use. However, the opportunity to confirm or debunk emerging data patterns across two different organizational sites and data samples is an important marker of the validity of our findings.

In addition, the finding that content moderation was similarly rare in both companies, given that one had official moderators and the other did not is worth further research. The indicated concerns about visibly appearing to censor or censure coworkers suggest that moderation may operate differently in an organizational context where individuals are more visible to each other. Similar concerns about being visibly critical of others have served as an obstacle to use wikis among workers, as organizational members are hesitant to delete or edit the communication of others (Holtzblatt et al., 2010). Future work should focus on the challenges and opportunities associated with moderation of ESM.

Finally, future research may benefit from expanding the methodological repertoire for studying ESM platforms in organizations (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017). We were interested in learning about the experiences of employees with ESM more broadly and learned that emotions and, in particular, negative emotions emerged as a dominant theme across both cases. Employees reflected on how these emotions were expressed and what reactions this triggered. While these accounts are insightful, future research may study how emotional communication may trigger reinforcing spirals (Hutchens et al., 2019) of affective communication or how emotional communication can be buffered by the moderators or by resisting the initial negative posts (Scarduzio & Tracy, 2015). This could be done by ethnographic observations on the ESM or using platform data combined with employee accounts. Analyzing the contents of the ESM platforms along with interviews of ESM users would enable the comparison of the perceptions of the ESM content and style with the actual message content and style on these platforms.

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The data underlying this article cannot be shared publicly due to the privacy of individuals and organizations participating in the study.

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