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Emotional expression and modality: an analysis of affective arousal and linguistic output in a computer vs. paper paradigm

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Abstract

The authors hypothesized that writing longhand and typing about a stressful experience are equivalent in terms of emotional arousal and essay content. 168 college students were randomly assigned to describe either a neutral or emotional topic by typing or writing longhand, in a 2×2 factorial design. Compared with students in the neutral conditions, students instructed to describe an emotional topic reported greater negative affect following the writing task and produced essays that contained significantly more personal and psychological content. Consistent with the hypothesis, participants writing longhand and typing were equivalent in the direction and degree of this difference. These findings suggest that at least a portion of the population (i.e. college students) is now comfortable and/or adept in expressing themselves emotionally on a computer.

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1. Introduction

A growing number of studies have demonstrated that writing about an emotional experience has significant physical, behavioral, and mental health benefits; among these are an increase in immune functioning, decrease in absenteeism from work, and an increase in positive mood (Francis & Pennebaker, 1996; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). While most of the research regarding emotional writing has focused exclusively on demonstrating its effectiveness, there is comparatively little research devoted to determining if the modality of

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writing influences therapeutic self-disclosure. Given the widespread use of word-processing and electronic mail (e-mail) in today's society, determining if these therapeutic benefits translate to computers appears to be an important area for further research.

When the issue of modality has been addressed, two main theories have emerged. In one line of research, it was theorized that writing in longhand holds distinctive benefits over typing because people are more accustomed to writing about personal events in longhand and because typing may exert an additional load on one's cognitive capacities, reducing the capability for self-focus (Brewin & Lennard, 1999). Evidence to support this theory was based on measured levels of emotional arousal. Utilizing this dependent measure, it was reported that students who wrote about a stressful experience in longhand indicated greater levels of negative affect, rated the writing task as more beneficial, and reported a higher level of self-disclosure.

Alternatively, it has been argued that, with the advent of e-mail and word processing programs, individuals are becoming more adept at expressing personal experiences with the typewritten word. Working from this line of reasoning, Wood, Sharp, and Hargrove (2001) focused on the content of the emotional essays and reported that there were virtually no differences in terms of linguistic content (e.g. the percentage of words used in a variety of categories including positive emotion words, negative emotion words, sad words, and cognitive words). Based on these findings, it seemed that, although paper may have been the primary mode of personal expression in the past, people have become more adept and comfortable at expressing themselves on a computer.

It is evident that there are no firm conclusions regarding the impact of computerization on writing about emotion. This lack of consensus can be attributed to several factors. First, previous studies used different dependent measures, with dependent measures of interest including emotional arousal and linguistic content. Second, there are a limited numbers of studies focusing primarily on writing modality. To date, there are only two studies that specifically address writing modality. Finally, as could be expected with such a small number of studies, there is a lack of replication of the aforementioned research findings.

This study addressed these limitations by incorporating the dependent measures utilized in previous research. Participants in this study were randomly assigned to write longhand (Longhand condition) or type (Typing condition) a description of superficial topic (Neutral condition) or an emotional event that has influenced their lives (Emotional condition) in a 2×2 factorial design. Comparisons between these four cells were made in terms of affective arousal and linguistic content. The goal of this analysis was to determine if equivalent levels of emotional arousal and linguistic output could be achieved on the computer in comparison to essays produced longhand.

1.1. Review of literature

1.1.1. Brief history

Virtually all forms of psychotherapy involve some degree of emotional disclosure. Whether based on psychodynamic, insight-oriented, or behavioral principles,

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