Using Punctuation as a Marker of Sincerity and Affective Convergence During Texting

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INTRODUCTION

- Human communication increasingly relies on technology
- Text based communication (TBC) lacks communicative richness, as compared to face to communication (Harris & Paradice, 2007)
- However, typographic cues may add informativeness by mimicking tone of voice in TBC (Riordan & Kreuz, 2010)
- Gunraj et al. (2016) found one word response with ending period is perceived as rude/ insincere

- **GOAL:** determine the effect of punctuation on the interpretation of intonation during TBC.
- **RESEARCH QUESTION:** Does intonational punctuation impact perceived sincerity and increase a reciprocal use of punctuation (i.e., emotional contagion; Chartrand & Bargh, 1999)?

METHOD

- **PARTICIPANTS:** N = 21 KSU undergrads, (11 female; mean age = 19.5 yrs)
- **DESIGN:** Two between subjects conversational tone conditions: Positive or Negative Conversational Tone

- **PROCEDURE:** A pseudo-texting conversation with a fake texting partner (i.e., the computer; see Fig 1)
- Participants responded to the computer's statements by selecting one of five predetermined response options that varied on punctuation.
- After selecting a response bubble, participants rated the sincerity of the computer's text message

FIG. 1 Negative (left) and Positive (right) texting environment. Participants chose (middle) from the five response options ranging from positive (exclamation) to negative (period).

MEASURES & RESULTS

- **SINCERITY RATING:** Pixel associated with a range of sincerity

- **PUNCTUATION ALIGNMENT:** Did the participant select the same punctuation as the pseudo-confederate?

LINEAR MIXED EFFECTS REGRESSION

- **SINCERITY RATING:** Participants rated the negatively valenced conversation as significantly more insincere than the positive condition
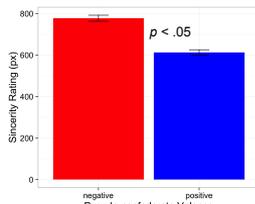- **PUNCTUATION ALIGNMENT:** increases as a function of sincerity rating for negative condition

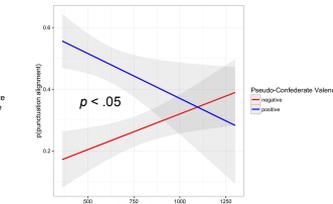FIG 2. Means and standard errors for sincerity ratings by conversational tone condition

FIG 3. Average sincerity rating by puncuation alignment between the pseudo-texting valence conditions (positive v. negative).

DISCUSSION:

- Participants are sensitive to the use of punctuation as a cue to conversation tone
- Emotional contagion occurred at different rates for positive and negative contexts (e.g., grew more slowly for the negative context)
- It is possible that participants were following rules of social engagement (e.g., don't be rude to a stranger, at least in the beginning)

CONCLUSION

Texters (college-aged) tend to use punctuation to communicate tone of voice. This may shape the interpretation of valence, pushing the conversation to become positive or negative.

References

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