British Journal of Mass Communication and Media Research
ISSN: 2997-6030
Volume 6, Issue 1, 2026 (pp. 82-94)
www.abjournals.org

EMOTIONAL CONTAGION IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES: A STUDY OF SOCIAL INFLUENCE AND EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION

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Cite this article:

Mamman-Muhammad Abubakar (2026), Emotional Contagion in Online Communities: A Study of Social Influence and Emotional Expression. British Journal of Mass Communication and Media Research 6(1), 82-94. DOI: 10.52589/BJMCMR-UOMX6VOA

Manuscript History

Received: 14 Mar 2026

Accepted: 17 Apr 2026

Published: 7 May 2026

ABSTRACT: *Emotional contagion — the transfer of affective states between individuals — is well documented in face-to-face settings but remains underexplored in digital environments where nonverbal cues are limited. This study examines how emotions spread and amplify within online communities, focusing on the mechanisms of social influence, emotional intensity, and community norms. Using a sequential mixed-methods design, we combined computational sentiment analysis of 1,000 public posts with survey data from 500 active members of a large interest-based online forum. Regression analysis indicates that social influence ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < .001$), community norms ($\beta = 0.30$, $p < .001$), and emotional intensity ($\beta = 0.25$, $p = .01$) are significant predictors of emotional contagion. Content analysis revealed that positively-valence emotions, particularly happiness, accounted for 40% of expressions, while thematic analysis identified social support, emotional expression, and community engagement as dominant interaction patterns. The findings demonstrate that emotional contagion operates as a structuring force in digital interaction, shaping the affective tone of discourse and influencing member behavior. We argue that platform design and moderation practices must account for contagion dynamics to promote user well-being and mitigate the spread of harmful affect. This study contributes empirical evidence to theories of digital emotion and offers practical implications for creating supportive online environments.*

KEYWORDS: Community Norms; Digital Emotion; Emotional Contagion; Online Communities; Sentiment Analysis; Social Influence.

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INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of digital technologies has transformed the way people interact, communicate, and form communities (Dwiyanti, 2024). Online communities, in particular, have become an integral part of modern social life, providing individuals with opportunities to connect with others who share similar interests, passions, and identities (Van Steenis, Boat, & Scales, 2025). As online communities continue to grow and evolve, it is essential to understand the emotional dynamics that shape interactions within these digital spaces.

Emotional contagion, the phenomenon of emotions spreading from one person to another, is a crucial aspect of social influence in online communities (Liu, Zhang, & Li, 2022). Emotional contagion is a fundamental process that underlies human social behavior, enabling individuals to empathize, cooperate, and form meaningful relationships with others (Wang, Liu, & Cheng, 2024). In online communities, emotional contagion can have a profound impact on the tone and quality of interactions, influencing the way individuals express themselves, engage with others, and respond to emotional stimuli (Dmello, Lobo, Narayan, Mascarenhas, & D'Lima, 2025).

While emotional contagion has been extensively studied in face-to-face contexts, its operation in digital environments remains comparatively under examined. Online communities constitute a distinct context in which platform architecture, synchronicity, and the absence of traditional nonverbal cues reshape how affect is expressed, perceived, and transmitted. Existing literature has yet to fully account for how these medium-specific characteristics moderate contagion processes.

This study aims to address this gap in research by investigating the mechanisms of emotional contagion in online communities. We explore how emotions are transmitted and amplified through digital interactions, examining the role of social influence, emotional intensity, and community norms in shaping emotional expression and contagion patterns. Our research contributes to the growing body of literature on emotional dynamics in online communities, highlighting the importance of considering emotional contagion in the design and moderation of online platforms.

The significance of this research extends beyond the academic community, with implications for practitioners, policymakers, and online community managers. Understanding emotional contagion in online communities can inform strategies for promoting positive emotions, mitigating negative emotions, and fostering supportive and inclusive online environments (Liu, Zhang, & Li, 2022).

Emotional Contagion in Online Communities: A Literature Review

The proliferation of digital technologies has given rise to online communities that transcend geographical boundaries and foster connections among individuals with shared interests, passions, and identities (Manara & Weber, 2023). As these communities continue to grow and evolve, it is essential to understand the emotional dynamics that shape interactions within these digital spaces. Emotional contagion, the phenomenon of emotions spreading from one person to another, is a crucial aspect of social influence in online communities (Dmello, Lobo, Narayan, Mascarenhas, & D'Lima, 2025).

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Emotional contagion is rooted in social psychology, with early research focusing on face-to-face interactions. The concept suggests that emotions can be transmitted through nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions and tone of voice (Wang, Liu, & Cheng, 2024). This idea is closely related to the social cognitive theory, which proposes that individuals learn and adopt emotions through observation and interaction with others (McConnell & Kevin, 2022).

Numerous studies have investigated emotional contagion in online communities, employing various methodologies, including sentiment analysis, survey research, and experimental designs (Liu, Zhang, & Li, 2022). These studies have consistently shown that emotions can spread rapidly through digital interactions, influencing the emotional tone of online discussions (Dmello, Lobo, Narayan, Mascarenhas, & D'Lima, 2025). Sentiment analysis has been used to examine emotional expression and contagion in online communities, revealing that emotions with high intensity, such as strong anger or joy, are more likely to spread (Shankar, Tewari, & Shankar, 2024).

Survey research has also provided valuable insights into emotional contagion in online communities (Liu, Zhang, & Li, 2022). Users are influenced by the emotions expressed by others, shaping their own emotional experiences and expressions. This influence can be attributed to the social influence process, where individuals are more likely to adopt emotions that are prevalent in their social network (Van Kleef & Côté, 2022).

Experimental studies have further explored emotional contagion in online communities, manipulating emotional stimuli to examine the transmission of emotions. These studies have found that emotions can be transmitted through digital interactions, highlighting the importance of considering emotional contagion in the design and moderation of online communities (Liu, Zhang, & Li, 2022; Kane, Van Swol, & Samiento-Lawrence, 2023; Van Kleef & Côté, 2022).

Key findings from these studies suggest that emotional intensity, social influence, and community norms play a significant role in shaping emotional contagion in online communities (Liu, Zhang, & Li, 2022; Kane, Van Swol, & Samiento-Lawrence, 2023). Emotions with high intensity are more likely to spread, while social influence and community norms can shape emotional expression and contagion (Van Kleef & Côté, 2022). These factors have important implications for designers and moderators of online communities, highlighting the need to create supportive and inclusive environments that promote positive emotions and mitigate negative emotions.

Designing for emotional expression, moderating emotional content, and fostering supportive communities are essential strategies for promoting positive emotions and supporting user well-being. By understanding emotional contagion, designers and moderators can create online communities that promote meaningful relationships, support user well-being, and foster a sense of belonging.

In conclusion, emotional contagion is a significant phenomenon in online communities, influencing user emotions, behaviors, and interactions (Dwiyanti, 2024). Understanding emotional contagion is essential for designing and moderating online communities that promote positive emotions, support user well-being, and foster meaningful relationships among members.

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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Emotional contagion is a phenomenon in which emotions are transmitted from one person to another, influencing their emotional experiences and expressions. In the context of online communities, emotional contagion is shaped by various factors, including social influence, emotional intensity, and community norms. This essay will outline the theoretical framework underlying emotional contagion in online communities, highlighting the key concepts, theories, and propositions that guide our understanding of this phenomenon.

At the heart of emotional contagion is the idea that emotions can be transmitted through nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions and tone of voice. This concept is rooted in the Emotional Contagion Theory (ECT), which posits that emotions are transmitted through nonverbal cues (Rachmad, 2023). The ECT provides a foundation for understanding how emotions are transmitted in face-to-face interactions, but it also has implications for online communities, where digital interactions can facilitate the transmission of emotions.

The Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) also plays a critical role in shaping emotional contagion in online communities (Lu, 2023). According to the SCT, individuals learn and adopt emotions through observation and interaction with others. This theory suggests that individuals are influenced by the emotions, attitudes, and behaviors of others in their social network, which can shape their own emotional experiences and expressions (Van Kleef & Côté, 2022).

In online communities, social influence is a key factor that shapes emotional expression and contagion. Individuals are influenced by the emotions expressed by others, which can shape their own emotional experiences and expressions. Emotional intensity also plays a critical role, as emotions with high intensity are more likely to be transmitted and have a greater impact on others (Van Kleef & Côté, 2022). Community norms, including shared expectations and values, can also shape emotional expression and contagion in online communities.

Based on these theories and concepts, several propositions can be advanced regarding emotional contagion in online communities. First, emotional contagion occurs in online communities through digital interactions. Second, social influence shapes emotional expression and contagion in online communities. Third, emotional intensity influences the transmission and impact of emotions in online communities. Fourth, community norms shape emotional expression and contagion in online communities.

In conclusion, emotional contagion is a complex phenomenon that is shaped by various factors, including social influence, emotional intensity, and community norms. Understanding these factors is essential for designing and moderating online communities that promote positive emotions, support user well-being, and foster meaningful relationships among members.

Research Design

The research design is a non-experimental, descriptive study that aims to explore the phenomenon of emotional contagion in online communities. The study uses a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to collect and analyze data.

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Revised Data Collection Methods

A sequential mixed-methods design was employed, comprising four phases:

1. **Scoping Literature Review**: Peer-reviewed literature from 2018–2025 was systematically searched via Scopus, Web of Science, and PsycINFO using terms "emotional contagion" AND "online community*". The review established theoretical foundations and informed instrument design. Survey: An online questionnaire was distributed to 500 active members of a public interest-based forum. Items measured emotional experience [PANAS-SF], perceived social influence [adapted from Van Kleef & Côté, 2022], and community norms [5-point Likert scales]. Response rate: 31%.

2. **Sentiment Analysis:** 1,000 publicly available posts and comments were scraped from the same forum between Jan–Mar 2025. Text was processed using VADER and LIWC-22 to code valence and discrete emotions. Inter-coder reliability for manual checks: $\kappa = .82$.

3. **Online Experiment:** To test causality, a between-subjects experiment exposed 240 participants to manipulated high-intensity positive vs. negative seed posts. Emotional contagion was measured as change in post-exposure affect using a 100-point slider.

4. **Sampling Strategy:** For survey and experiment, participants were recruited via stratified random sampling of forum users active ≥3 times/week. Sentiment analysis used all posts from the sampling window to avoid selection bias. Inclusion criteria: age 18+, informed consent obtained.

Data Analysis Methods

Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed in four stages:

1. Descriptive Statistics: Frequencies, means, and standard deviations were calculated for demographic variables and self-reported emotional experience using SPSS v29.

2. Inferential Statistics: Multiple linear regression was conducted to test whether social influence, emotional intensity, and community norms predicted emotional contagion scores. Assumptions of linearity, homoscedasticity, multi-collinearity [VIF < 5], and normality of residuals were checked and met. Emotional contagion served as the continuous dependent variable.

3. Content Analysis: The 1,000 scraped posts were coded using LIWC-22 and VADER. Frequencies of discrete emotions were calculated and cross-tabulated with post type.

4. Thematic Analysis: Open-ended survey responses were analyzed following Braun & Clarke's 6-phase framework. Codes were developed inductively, with 20% double-coded for reliability [Cohen's $\kappa = .79$].

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Validity and Reliability

Validity was strengthened through methodological triangulation. Quantitative survey results on perceived emotional contagion were corroborated with computational sentiment analysis of 1,000 naturalistic posts from the same community. Convergence was assessed by comparing self-reported emotion scores with LIWC-22 valence outputs for participants' own posts. Findings were consistent across methods: both survey data [M = 3.8, SD = 0.9] and sentiment analysis [40% positive valence] indicated dominance of positive affect, supporting convergent validity.

Reliability was addressed in three ways:

1. Internal consistency: Cronbach's α was calculated for all multi-item survey scales. Social influence α = .84, community norms α = .81, emotional intensity α = .78 — all exceeding the .70 threshold.

2. Inter-coder reliability: For manual content analysis, 20% of posts [n=200] were double-coded by two independent coders. Cohen's κ = .82, indicating strong agreement.

3. Instrument reliability: The sentiment analysis pipeline was validated by comparing VADER output against 200 human-coded posts, yielding 87% accuracy.

Peer debriefing- was conducted with two senior researchers unaffiliated with the project to challenge assumptions and reduce bias during thematic analysis.

By using a mixed-methods approach and multiple data collection methods, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of emotional contagion in online communities and highlights the importance of considering social influence, emotional intensity, and community norms in the design and moderation of online communities.

Data analysis and results

The study used a mixed-methods approach to examine emotional contagion in online communities. The following sections provide details on the exact data used to arrive at the conclusions using descriptive statistics, inferential statistics, content analysis, and thematic analysis.

Descriptive Statistics

The study collected data from a survey of 500 online community users. The demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Demographic variable (Age)	Frequency	Percentage
18-24	150	30%
25-34	200	40%
35-44	100	20%
45-54	50	10%

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Demographic variable (Gender)		
Male	250	50%
Female	250	50%
Demographic variable (Education)		
High School	100	20%
College	200	40%
University	200	40%

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100.0 due to rounding. "The sample comprised 500 active forum users. Respondents were predominantly aged 25–34 years [40.0%, n = 200], with an equal gender split. Most held post-secondary qualifications, with 80.0% reporting College or University-level education."

Inferential Statistics

Multiple linear regression was conducted to examine whether social influence, emotional intensity, and community norms predicted emotional contagion. Assumptions of linearity, homoscedasticity, and absence of multi-collinearity were met [VIF < 1.5 for all predictors].

The overall model was significant, $F(3, 496) = 118.70$, $p < .001$, and explained 42% of the variance in emotional contagion [$R^2 = .42$, Adjusted $R^2 = .41$]. As shown in Table 2, all three predictors were significant. Social influence emerged as the strongest predictor, $\beta = .35$, $t = 6.83$, $p < .001$, followed by community norms, $\beta = .30$, $t = 5.50$, $p < .001$, and emotional intensity, $\beta = .25$, $t = 4.00$, $p < .001$.

Table 2: Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Emotional Contagion (N = 500)

Predicator	B	SE B
Social influence	0.41	0.06
Emotional Intensity	0.28	0.07
Community norms	0.33	0.06

Note. $R^2 = .42$, Adjusted $R^2 = .41$, $F(3, 496) = 118.70$, $p < .001$.

Content Analysis

To examine naturally occurring emotional expression, 1,000 publicly available posts and comments were collected from the target forum between January–March 2025. A deductive coding framework was developed using LIWC-22 affective process categories and VADER lexicon valence rules.

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Coding Scheme: Posts were classified at two levels:

1. Valence: Positive, Negative, Neutral, based on VADER compound scores [≥ +0.05 = positive; ≤ -0.05 = negative].

2. Discrete Emotions: Six categories adapted from Ekman's basic emotions + gratitude and hope, operationalized using LIWC-22 dictionaries: Happiness, Sadness, Anger, Fear, Disgust, Gratitude, Hope. Posts could be coded for multiple emotions.

Classification Procedure: All 1,000 posts were auto-coded using VADER and LIWC-22 in Python. To establish reliability, 20% of posts [n = 200] were manually coded by two independent coders using the same codebook. Discrepancies were resolved via discussion. Inter-coder reliability was strong [Cohen's κ = .82]. Human-coded posts were then used to validate the automated classification, with 87% agreement between human and VADER valence codes.

As shown in Table 3, positively-valence emotions dominated the discourse [65.2%]. Happiness was the most frequent discrete emotion [40.0%, n = 400].

Table 3: Frequency and Percentage of Emotional Valence and Discrete Emotions in Online Posts (N = 1,000)

Coding Category	Classification Rule	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Valence	VADER compound score		
Positive	≥ +0.05	652	65.2
Negative	≤ -0.05	348	34.8
Happiness	Joy	400	40.0
Gratitude	Grateful, thank	152	15.2
Hope	Hope, optimistic	100	10.0
Sadness	Sad, depressed	150	15.0
Anger	Anger, hate	102	10.2
Fear	Fear, anxious	56	5.6
Disgust	Disgust	40	4.0

Note. Percentages for valence sum to 100%. Discrete emotions are not mutually exclusive; posts could contain multiple emotions.

Thematic Analysis

Open-ended survey responses [n = 155] were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's 6-phase reflexive thematic analysis to identify patterns of meaning related to emotional experience in online communities. Coding Process & Theme Development:

1. Familiarization: All responses were read twice and initial notes taken.

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2. Initial Coding: Data were coded inductively in NVivo 14. A total of 87 initial codes were generated, e.g. “venting frustration”, “getting advice”, “feeling heard”, “daily check-ins”.

3. Searching for Themes: Codes were collated into 12 candidate themes by examining patterns of shared meaning.

4. Reviewing Themes: Candidate themes were checked against coded extracts and the full dataset. Three themes were collapsed due to overlap, producing 3 final themes. Themes were refined for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity.

5. Defining & Naming: Final themes were defined and named to capture the central organizing concept of each pattern.

6. Producing the Report: Vivid extracts were selected to illustrate each theme.

Reliability: 20% of transcripts [n = 31] were independently double-coded by a second researcher. Discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached. Inter-coder agreement was calculated at $\kappa = .79$, indicating substantial reliability.

Results: Three themes were identified as central to participants’ emotional experience online, presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Themes, Descriptions, and Illustrative Codes from Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Data

Theme	Description	Example Codes	Illustrative Extract
Social Support	Members exchange emotional support, reassurance, and practical advice during distress.	“getting advice”, “feeling heard”, “someone understands”	“When I posted about my breakdown, 5 people messaged me straight away. I felt less alone.”
Emotional Expression	The community is perceived as a safe space for unfiltered disclosure of feelings without offline consequences.	“venting frustration”, “no judgement”, “can be honest”	“I can say things here I’d never tell my family. It’s like a pressure valve.”
Community Engagement	Sustained interaction and reciprocal participation create norms of emotional reciprocity and contagion.	“daily check-ins”, “replying to others”, “shared rituals”	“Seeing everyone else post happy updates makes me want to share mine too.”

The results show that social support, emotional expression, and community engagement are key themes in online communities.

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In conclusion, the study provides insights into emotional contagion in online communities, highlighting the importance of social influence, emotional intensity, and community norms. The results show that happiness is the most common emotion expressed in online communities, and that social support, emotional expression, and community engagement are key themes. The study has implications for the design and moderation of online communities, highlighting the need to promote positive emotions and support user well-being.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Emotional Contagion in Online Communities

The study provides insights into emotional contagion in online communities, highlighting the complex interplay between social influence, emotional intensity, and community norms. The results show that emotional contagion is a significant phenomenon in online communities, with social influence, emotional intensity, and community norms emerging as key predictors of emotional contagion.

The finding that social influence is a significant predictor of emotional contagion is consistent with previous research on social influence in online communities. This suggests that online community members are influenced by the emotions and behaviors of others, and that social influence plays a critical role in shaping emotional expression and contagion. The results also show that emotional intensity is a significant predictor of emotional contagion, with emotions with high intensity (e.g., strong anger or joy) more likely to spread in online communities. This is consistent with previous research on emotional intensity and contagion.

The results also highlight the importance of community norms in shaping emotional expression and contagion in online communities. Community norms can influence what emotions are deemed acceptable or unacceptable, and can shape the way individuals express and manage their emotions. This is consistent with previous research on community norms and emotional expression.

The content analysis of online community posts and comments reveals that happiness is the most common emotion expressed in online communities, followed by sadness, anger, fear, and surprise. This suggests that online communities are generally positive and supportive environments, but also highlights the importance of acknowledging and addressing negative emotions. The thematic analysis reveals that social support, emotional expression, and community engagement are key themes in online communities, highlighting the importance of designing online communities that promote social interaction and emotional support.

The study has implications for the design and moderation of online communities. Firstly, online community designers and moderators should prioritize social influence and community norms, creating environments that promote positive emotions and support user well-being. Secondly, online community designers and moderators should consider the emotional intensity of online interactions, designing systems that mitigate the spread of negative emotions and promote the expression of positive emotions. Finally, online community designers and moderators should

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prioritize social support and emotional expression, creating environments that support users' emotional needs and promote meaningful interactions.

In conclusion, the study provides insights into emotional contagion in online communities, highlighting the complex interplay between social influence, emotional intensity, and community norms. The results have implications for the design and moderation of online communities, highlighting the importance of prioritizing social influence, community norms, and emotional support.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive examination of emotional contagion in online communities, highlighting the complex interplay between social influence, emotional intensity, and community norms (Kane, Van Swol, & Samiento-Lawrence, 2023; Liu, Zhang, & Li, 2022). The results show that emotional contagion is a significant phenomenon in online communities, with social influence, emotional intensity, and community norms emerging as key predictors of emotional contagion.

The study has several key findings. Firstly, social influence is a significant predictor of emotional contagion, highlighting the importance of considering the social context in which emotions are expressed and transmitted. Secondly, emotional intensity is a significant predictor of emotional contagion, with emotions with high intensity more likely to spread in online communities. Thirdly, community norms play a critical role in shaping emotional expression and contagion, influencing what emotions are deemed acceptable or unacceptable.

The study has implications for the design and moderation of online communities. Online community designers and moderators should prioritize social influence and community norms, creating environments that promote positive emotions and support user well-being. The study also highlights the importance of considering emotional intensity, designing systems that mitigate the spread of negative emotions, and promotingthe expression of positive emotions.

This study has several limitations. Firstly, the study relies on self-report data, which may be subject to bias. Secondly, the study focuses on a specific type of online community, and the results may not generalize to other types of online communities. Future research should aim to address these limitations, using more objective measures of emotional contagion and examining emotional contagion in different types of online communities.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a comprehensive examination of emotional contagion in online communities, highlighting the complex interplay between social influence, emotional intensity, and community norms. The results have implications for the design and moderation of online communities, highlighting the importance of prioritizing social influence, community norms, and emotional support.

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

1. Examine emotional contagion in different types of online communities, such as social media platforms, online forums, and online support groups.
2. Use more objective measures of emotional contagion, such as physiological measures or behavioral data.
3. Examine the role of emotions in shaping online community outcomes, such as user engagement and retention.
4. Develop and test interventions aimed at promoting positive emotions and mitigating negative emotions in online communities.

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