

Gender Differences in Emoticon Use on Mobile Text Messaging: Evidence from a Korean Sample

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the role of emoticons in text messaging on mobile phone. Results from a sample of 126 college students in Korea showed that motivations of emoticons use were entertainment, fashion, expressing personal emotions/intimacy, managing message meaning, and regulating conversation. These findings indicated that emoticons use was highly related to socio-emotional context in mobile communication. Furthermore, the study found that there were gender differences in motivations of emoticons use: female students were more likely to use emoticons to express emotions/intimacy and manage message meaning than male students. Based on these findings the study suggested that emoticons played a role as a facilitator that supplements users' emotion and interpretation of message.

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Introduction

Emoticons are basically graphic accents that look like faces with emotions. They have been widely used in online applications such as email, bulletin boards and Instant Relay Chats [1]. Many studies view emoticons as surrogates for nonverbal cues in a literal sense and graphic displays. People use more emoticons in communicating with friends than in communicating with strangers. Furthermore, more emoticons are used in positive contexts than in negative contexts [2]. Although the utility of emoticons seems fairly widespread, less is known about their use and impact. This research investigates the use of emoticons in text messaging on mobile. In particular, the empirical questions that the present study addresses are why people use the emoticons in text messaging on mobile and how males and females use them differently.

CMC literature suggests CMC users normally use emoticons as substitutes for the missing cues, such as “☺” for smiling. Emoticons are useful to express emotion, enhance the verbal part of the message, and express humor [3]. And emoticons are useful in strengthening the intensity of a message. A positive message with a smile is perceived more positively than a positive text alone. Some studies also showed females used more emoticons in diverse CMC methods such as email and online chatting. However, these findings were not fully investigated with the new communication technology, mobile phone. As the popularity of mobile phones has increased in the last decade, text messaging has become one of the primary means of communication among peers for college students. It is argued that since text messaging on mobile phone is the most limited and short messages even compared to other CMC technologies (e.g., email), mobile users may use emoticons to substitute for missing non-verbal cues. Nonetheless research on emoticons use on mobile text messaging is still limited and some basic questions to be answered are: why people use emoticons and how males and females use them differently. Therefore, the present study attempts to examine motivations for emoticons use and gender differences in emoticons use. Given that the use of emoticons is a relatively new topic in the field of mobile communication, this study contributes to a new line of research on the expression of emotions in mobile communication.

Theoretical Background

Motivations of emoticon use

CMC literature suggest that “as bandwidth narrows, media allow less

‘social presence’; communication is likely to be described as less friendly, emotional, or personal and more serious, businesslike, or task oriented” [4]. Despite these limitations, users have found ways to increase the richness of CMC and achieve socially oriented communication through it. One way is through the creation and use of emoticons created with typographic symbols that appear sideways resembling facial expression.

The use of the emoticons is well documented in a variety of sources in the CMC literature. For example, several studies [5] suggest that the use of emoticons in CMC is an attempt to compensate for the lack of the usual nonverbal components. Emoticon, also known as smiley, is derived from the hybrid of “emotion” and “icons”, and sometimes referred to as a “graphical accent” [6] or “graphic icon” [7]. It is created using several keyboard characters to denote a facial expression and is assumed to act as emblems for emotion [8]. Danet et al. [8] also reflected this assumption and defined emoticons as icons for ‘the expression of emotion, or for marking one’s intent as non-serious’. Common examples of emoticons are happy face :-) and sad face :- (; ” and the corresponding graphical ones are ☺ and ☹.

As an important part of the paralinguistic cues in CMC and an emergent popular practice on the Internet services such as Internet relay chat and Instant Messaging, emoticons have attracted scholarly attention [9,10-12]. Studies on emoticon use indicated that people primarily used them to express emotion, strengthen messages, and display humor or sarcasm [13] and emoticons are interpreted as a signal of emotional information in addition to a verbal message [14]. These findings confirmed that emoticons function as emblems for people’s feelings in a similar way as nonverbal behaviors do in face-to-face [15].

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Derks et al. [2] found that people used emoticons to express emotions such as humor and irony and to strengthen a message on the Internet chat. Other studies suggest that motives for using emoticons are for expressing emotion, enhancing the verbal part of the message (act as a supporting emoticon), and expressing humor [3]. Finally Derks et al. [2] concluded that emoticons can serve the three functions: providing information, regulating interaction, and expressing intimacy.

Although emoticon use has received much scholarly attention, nonetheless, current emoticon literature is limited. Most studies narrowly focused on online applications such as email and Internet chat; none of these examines emoticons use in mobile communication. The present study aimed to examine the individual's motivations for use of emoticons while sending a text message on mobile phone. Thus the following research question is proposed:

RQ1: What are the motivations for using emoticons in text messaging on mobile phone among college students?

Gender differences in emoticons use

Since females use more non-verbal cues in face-to-face conversation [2], researchers have focused on gender differences in emoticons use in CMC. It is common knowledge that women are generally more emotionally expressive than men (e.g., [16]). CMC literature argues that women may be more likely to use emoticons than men in mediated communication. Indeed several studies (e.g., [17], [18]) confirm that women used emoticons more often than men. Females sent more messages with emoticons, although males used a more diverse range of emoticons [19]. In contrast, Huffacker and Calvert [20] found that male teenage bloggers used more emoticons than females. On the other hand, other studies have failed to show gender differences. Emoticons are used more in socially oriented tasks, overall, there is no gender difference in frequency of emoticons use [21]. In sum, these findings suggest that across all mediated communication methods, there are not static gender differences. Thus the second research question is as follows:

RQ2: What are the differences in motivations for emoticons use between male and female students?

Method

Sample: This study used surveys to find out users' motivations in emoticons use. Questionnaires were administered in two classes at a large university in Seoul, South Korea. College students were chosen as the target sample in the study because text messaging on mobile has become the daily routine for them. A total of 126 surveys were completed; 69 males and 57 females. The age of these respondents ranged from 18 to 27 years ($M=20.74$, $SD=1.47$). The distribution of academic level was freshman (43.3%, $N=57$), sophomore (24.1%, $N=31$), junior (21.1%, $N=27$), and senior (8.3%, $N=11$).

Motives for using emoticons: To measure motivation for emoticon use, selected items used in previous studies (e.g., [3], [2], [14]) were included in the questionnaire. The final questionnaire consisted of 15 motivation statements as primary motives ranging from managing message meaning, expressing emotion and intimacy, regulating conversation, to entertainment and fashion. Respondents were asked to report their levels of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree).

Findings

Motivations for emoticons use

An exploratory principle component factor analysis with varimax rotation was conducted to examine motivations for emoticons use. The analysis accounted for 67.1% of total variance and the results are summarized in Table 1. The first factor was 'managing message meaning.' It consisted of three items reflecting how emoticons can be used to communicate clearly, supplement message and clarify meaning. The second factor was 'expressing emotion and intimacy.' It included four items suggesting that emoticons were used to express personal emotional feeling and attachment with people, make communicate friendly and humorous. The third factor was 'entertainment.' It comprised three items suggesting that emoticons can help users amuse and enjoy. The fourth factor, 'fashion,' consisted of two items indicating that using emoticons is fashionable and stylish. The last factor was 'regulating conversation.' It consisted of three items indicating that respondents used emoticons to regulate conversation by making conversation soft, simple and non-serious.

The means of each motivation were assessed to determine which motives were the most salient for the respondents. The results show that expressing emotion/intimacy ($M=3.75$, $SD=.75$) and managing message meaning ($M=3.62$, $SD=.85$) had highest mean score. Regulating conversation ($M=3.45$, $SD=.88$) was also a salient factor, whereas entertainment ($M=3.25$, $SD=.93$) and fashion ($M=2.88$, $SD=.99$) were less salient motivations for using emoticons in text messaging on mobile phone. In sum, respondents in the sample considered emoticons to be a medium that facilitates personal feeling and attachment with others. Also they perceived that emoticons had an impact on message and conversation.

Gender differences in emoticons use

The second research question was to find out if there were any differences in motivations of emoticons use between male and female students. T-tests were conducted to see the differences between the groups, males and females in regard to motivations of emoticons use. As shown in Table 2, there were two significant differences between males and females in motivations of emoticon use. Results showed that female students were more likely to use emoticons to express emotion/intimacy and manage message meaning than males.

Discussion

Mobile text messaging has become a popular means of social communication. For college students exchanging short text messages on mobile has become a daily routine. Our goal in the present study was to understand how emoticons are used in text messaging on mobile and, in particular, if a gender gap exists in their use of emoticons.

The study found five salient reasons for using emoticons on mobile text: managing message meaning, expressing emotions/intimacy, entertainment, fashion, and regulating conversation. In particular, the study found that expressing emotions/intimacy and managing meaning of messaging were the most salient reasons for using emoticons among college students in Korea. These findings confirm the previous studies indicating that emoticons are helpful to communication social cues, emotion and clarify meaning of message [20] and emoticons are useful in strengthening the intensity of a

Items	Factors						
	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
Managing message meaning							
To communicate clearly	3.51	.84	.79	.08	.04	.06	.01
To supplement message	3.71	.83	.77	-.04	.26	.07	-.00
To clarify meaning	3.64	.87	.74	.11	.54	.01	.16
Expressing emotion/intimacy							
To express personal feeling	3.88	.71	.26	.70	.09	.04	.14
To express humor	3.74	.74	.30	.66	.17	.09	.13
To express friendliness	3.62	.74	.28	.65	.08	.09	-.03
To express intimacy	3.76	.82	.24	.65	.02	.10	.12
Entertainment							
Because they are enjoyable	3.30	.86	.06	.11	.76	.09	.06
Because they amuse me	3.47	.89	.08	-.02	.75	.13	.07
Because I just like to use them	3.00	1.06	.07	.00	.70	.10	.13
Fashion							
To look stylish	2.90	1.02	.04	.08	.04	.87	.01
To look fashionable	2.86	.95	.17	.00	.05	.87	.05
Regulating conversation							
To make conversation soft	3.38	.93	-.00	-.02	.04	.18	.74
To make conversation non-serious	3.40	.86	.17	.09	.14	.00	.70
To make conversation simple	3.58	.85	.22	.20	.17	-.03	.67
Eigenvalue			4.00	3.90	3.49	2.40	1.01
Variance explained(%)			23.70	13.70	12.10	11.20	6.40
Cronbach's alpha			.88	.83	.83	.73	.72

Table 1: Factor Analysis Results for Motives for Using Emoticons.

Motivations	T-value	Mean		SD	
		Male	Female	Male	Female
Managing messaging meaning	-2.84**	3.25	3.57	0.98	0.96
Expressing emotion/intimacy	-1.99*	3.37	3.69	0.82	0.83
Entertainment	-1.01	3.12	3.24	0.76	0.93
Fashion	-1.35	2.64	2.73	0.66	0.85
Regulating conversation	-1.35	3.35	3.45	0.97	0.93

Table 2: T-test of motivations of emoticons use between males and females.
**P<.01 *P<.05

message [2]. Combined, it is concluded that similar to facial expression, emoticons are mainly used in socio-emotional context in mobile communication. Given that due to its simplicity, text messaging affords briefer communications, use of emoticons is another way in which people can imbue their messages with social meaning in text based mobile communication [11].

Our findings also show that there are gender differences in the motivations of emoticons use. Females used emoticons more for expressing emotion/intimacy and managing message meaning than males. CMC literature suggest that females are more emotionally expressive and use more non-verbal cues compared to males on text messaging [6]; and females are more likely to send messages with emoticons than males [19]. Therefore, it is argued that for women emoticons function as a socio-emotional tool to support communication information.

Of course, the present study can be considered as a first step to develop more knowledge about emoticons use on mobile. It has some limitations. For example, participants are all college students and clearly they do not represent the typical home-based mobile user. It is also possible that individual differences in emoticons use may occur cross-culturally. Future studies should investigate if cultural differences exist by comparing emoticon users in different countries. Furthermore, although the survey method used in the present study may provide useful information about why college students use emoticons, more research from a different methodological approach is needed. For example, close observation of the actual emoticon behavior with focus groups will help us understand in what circumstances college students use emoticons and what emoticons are predominant in their exchanging short messages on mobile.

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