

Gender and Computer-Mediated Communication: Emoticons in a Digital Forum in Persian

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Received: 31/03/2014

Accepted: 18/12/2014

Abstract

This study aimed to gain an insight into whether computer-mediated communication (CMC) in the form of a digital forum can reflect gendered discursive practices. A great deal of research has now established that computer-mediated interactions embody gendered differences in the use of emoticons, but few studies have examined the potential effect of the gender of the emoticon-receiver on the frequency and type of the emoticons. Drawing on a corpus of 386 posts from 26 interlocutors—both male and female participants—we explored how men and women receive emoticons, not just how they send emoticons. Our analysis of the transcripts focused on coding emoticons by type and frequency of occurrence. Each instance of emoticon use was initially coded based on our own interpretation of emoticons' potential meaning in their particular surrounding texts. Findings revealed that the male participants displayed more emoticons than the females. Moreover, gendered differences were found in terms of the gender of the addressee: Both the males and females used significantly more emoticons when interacting with interlocutors from the opposite gender.

Keywords: Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC); Digital Forum; Emoticon; Gendered Discourse

1. Introduction

During the last two decades, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become ubiquitous in everyday individual interactions (Graddol & Swann, 1989; Herring, 1993, 1994, 2000, 2003, 2004; Hinds & Bailey, 2003; Putnam, 2001). CMC can be synchronous (e.g., chat) or asynchronous (e.g., e-mail), and the messages are predominantly typewritten (Adrianson, 2001). The number and variation of electronic message systems and electronic conference systems—e-mail, short-messaging services (SMS), and instant messaging (IM), to name a few—has grown exponentially. Recently, synchronized chat services, such as AIM, Google, or Skype have also been increasingly used to keep in touch with others in real time.

In face-to-face settings, as Kim, Frank, and Kim (2014) explain, mutual monitoring occurs between interactants, thus individuals' communicative behaviors are subject to the social norms of emotional display, which determine how to express or suppress emotions appropriately. This is not the case in CMC settings, where mutual monitoring does not happen. Overwhelmingly, researchers who study IM discourse attempt to explain features of IM within a conceptual model of written or oral language (Baron, 2004; Crystal, 2001; Gurak, 2001). Although these researchers claim that IM technology does allow for a new form of communication to emerge, their underlying assumption is that IM discourse retains characteristics of speech, writing, or both. Such reliance on the speech/writing dichotomy has resulted in labeling anything other than familiar forms of print-linguistic text as additive or paralinguistic.

In writing as well as in some forms of CMC like IM, there is a natural lack of the paralinguistic characterizations. Instead, the use of emoticons in CMC is an attempt to compensate for the lack of the usual nonverbal components (Antonijevic, 2005; Crystal, 2001; Krohn, 2004; Lewis & Fabos, 2005). Antonijevic, for example, defined emoticons as “emotional icons . . . visual representations of facial expressions used in computer-mediated-communication (CMC) to indicate the mood and/or emotion of the user” (2005, p. 1). Lewis and Fabos (2005) found that “with IM’s limitations as a written communication, these tools (emoticons) were one more way to express emotion and engage the readers” (p. 483); other scholars who have studied CMC and emoticons define emoticons in similar ways (Derks, Bos, & von Grmbkow, 2007; Province, Spencer, & Mandell, 2007). Most of us are active participants in IM culture, engaging in IM regularly in our professional and personal lives. The assumption of compensatory role for emoticons quickly crumbles when everyday communicators consider a miscommunication found in an IM or a possible misreading of a friendly smile as flirtation (or flirtatious smile as friendliness). Therefore, as IM users, we are attuned to the range of possibilities beyond compensation that emoticons may afford within IM discourse. We are now more hesitant to accept current arguments that the emoticon is simply decorative, additive, and unnecessary. As Province and Mandell (2007) argue, the emoticon has begun to not simply serve as a paralinguistic device in IM discourse but as something more than a crude stand-in for missing facial features that are more rhetorically motivated and increasingly semiotically charged. The Internet was initially described as an inherently democratizing medium that would make social differences irrelevant or invisible online (Eisenclas, 2012; Graddol & Swann, 1989; Herring, 2000). Spears and Lea (1994), for example, claimed that CMC “can serve to reduce the social barriers to communication and thus the impact of status differentials, resulting in greater equality of participation” (p. 428). Such expectations were based on the absence of ‘gating features’ (Ben-Ze’ev, 2004, p. 37), that is, the message sender’s

social and physical characteristics such as age, sex, class, physical attractiveness, or (dis)ability that may impact interactions in face-to-face encounters. In fact, these early studies proposed CMC as a new gender-neutral style of interaction online.

However, claims of widespread gender equality have not been supported by most research on online interaction (Harp & Tremayne, 2006; Herring, 1993, 2000, 2004, 2008; Selfe & Meyer, 1991). Indeed, the literature has shown that “a democratizing technology cannot in itself guarantee social equality, nor erase social, political and cultural factors that impact on its adoption and use” (Eisenchlas, 2012, p. 336), that women are still underrepresented in electronic bulletin boards, blogs and discussion groups, well below their proportional representations on those sites (Herring, 2004), and that in mixed-sex public discussions men still dominate interactions in terms of both quantity of speech and aggressiveness in responses (Herring, 1993, 2004, 2008; Selfe & Meyer, 1991), replicating findings that have been reported for off-line interactions (Coates, 1993; Herring, 1994; West & Zimmerman, 1983).

Regarding the gendered differences in the use of emoticons in CMC, the literature reports mixed results. Some studies have supported the expectation that females use more emoticons than males in online messages (e.g., Witmer & Katzman, 1997), and that in instant messaging males use more emoticons with females than with other men, whereas females use an equal number of emoticons when interacting with both sexes (Lee, 2003). Huffaker and Calvert (2005), however, challenged that expectation: The males used more emoticons than the females—not only flirtatious ones, as predicted, but also sad ones. The same study also found that, contrary to predictions, there were no clear gender differences for aggression favoring the males, nor were there differences favoring the females in passivity. These contradictory findings indicate that gendered linguistic behavior is highly context-specific, and that the context of the interaction may be more important than gender in determining linguistic behavior (Cameron, 1992; Rodino, 1997).

One less explored issue in the area of gender and emoticons is the potential effect of the gender of the emoticon-receiver on the frequency and type of the emoticons. We sought to contribute epistemically to this area through an examination of the effect of the gender of online interlocutors on the frequency and type of emoticons given to them, that is, how men and women receive emoticons—not just how they send emoticons—in terms of frequency and type.

2. The Present Study

The previous studies on the use of emoticons in CMC have primarily focused on the social function of emoticons and have examined usage intent and

user perception through questions that are best answered through qualitative methods that often parallel ethnographic case studies. The present study, though, sought to uncover characteristics of emoticons within IM discourse without interpreting or inferring authorial or reader intent; therefore, a quantitative approach was required. It is by quantifying use that we can identify which emoticons are most employed by interlocutors generally and in certain instances. Additionally, quantifying our work would allow others to study IM conventions in ways that could verify or challenge our findings.

Given the anonymity of online communication, the emoticon-sender's gender may be difficult to ascertain. Indeed, some user names are gender neutral, whereas some users prefer a photograph or avatar instead of a name in their profile. In order to avoid such a potential problem, we focused on data from a digital forum whose members use real names as their user names. Furthermore, our data set was collected to ensure that the IM conversations were naturally occurring. That is, the participants' conversations were not explicitly generated for our study; rather, the conversations collected were part of their conversation logs—records automatically kept within users' IM accounts that provide a history of conversations.

The studies reviewed so far focused on CMC in English. This study, however, sought to extend the discussion into the Persian language by investigating whether there is a relationship between gender and the use of emoticons in terms of the frequency and type of the emoticons. The following research question guided this enquiry into gender and CMC in the Persian language:

- Is there a relationship between the gender of emoticon-sender/receiver and the frequency and type of emoticons?

3. Data Collection and Coding

We analyzed an intact data set collected from a digital forum whose members were first-year students of medicine enrolled at an Iranian university. This corpus included 386 posts from 26 interlocutors. Our analysis of the IM transcripts focused on coding emoticons by type and frequency of occurrence. After reading and rereading our data set, we initially coded each instance of emoticon use by type (e.g., 😊 (happy), 😭 (crying)). This initial coding was based on our own interpretation of emoticons' potential meaning in their particular surrounding texts (see Example # 1). However, some emoticons were used without any surrounding text; hence their meaning was not obvious. Therefore, we asked those participants who used such emoticons via e-mail for their views as to what mood they wanted to convey by employing those specific emoticons (see Example # 2). The derivations were coded on the basis of the emoticon's mouth, with the assumption that a similar mouth shape in the context of a facial expression would convey a similar mood. For

example, both 😄 and 😊 express a comparable emotion (see Table 1 for a list of emoticon types and derivations):

➤ **Example # 1**

- Female 1: من ۲۱ درصد عربی زدم!

[I answered 21% of Arabic tests correctly]

گفتم در جریان باشید! 🤔

[FYI]

- Male ۸: آفرین 🙌

[way to go]

➤ **Example # 2**

- Female 1: منم هنوز باورم نشده! میدونم که کنسل نمیشه ولی کاش بشه... 🤔

[I can't believe my eyes yet! I know it's not gonna be cancelled, I wish it would though]

- Male 1: خدایا فروید رو لعنت کن 🤔

[God damn Freud]

- Male 2: من خودمم خوب نخوندم ولی هر کی اسم کنسل شدن بیاره با من طرفه 🤔

[I just didn't cram for it, but whoever says any word about cancelling is gonna be on thin ice with me]

- Male 1: 🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔

Table 1. List of Emoticons by Type and Derivation

Emoticon Type	Derivation	Potential Meaning	Emoticon	Derivation	Potential Meaning
1. 😡	👉👉👉👉👉	Angry	8. 😱		Shocked
2. 😏	🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔	Sarcastic	9. 🤔	! 🤔	Confused
3. 😊	😊😊😊😊😊	Happy	10. 🙌🙌		Apologetic
4. 🤔		Sick	11. 🤔		Embarrassed
5. 🙌		Encouraging	12. 🤔		Indecision
6. 🤔		Playfulness	13. 🤔		Innocent
7. 🌹		Rose	14. 🤔		Crying

4. Results

4.1. Emoticons: Total Selection and Frequency

The emoticons found in the corpus were categorized into 14 types, and a list of instances of emoticon use that occurred most-to-least frequently in the data set was generated. Throughout the 386 posts, we found 315 instances of emoticons.

As Table 2 illustrates, the participants relied heavily on three types of all possible emoticons and used 26 different emoticons in total. Three types of emoticons, that is, 😏 (sarcastic), 😄 (happy), and 😭 (crying) comprised 187 of the 315 total emoticons. The 😏 (sarcastic) was the most frequently used, and 😱 (shocked) and 🙌 (encouraging) were the least frequently used emoticons (see Table 2).

4.2. Emoticons: Gendered Selection and Frequency

The potential effect of the gender of emoticon senders/receivers on the frequency of emoticons they sent/received was examined. Drawing on the address terms used by the emoticon senders, we tagged the emoticons the interlocutors used as either specified interlocutors (the female/male interlocutors) or unspecified interlocutors (both the female and male interlocutors):

Table 2. List of Emoticons by Instance (I) and Percentage (%)

Most Frequent Emoticons				Least Frequent Emoticons			
		I	%			I	%
Type 2	😏 [Sarcastic]	91	28.8	Type 10	🙌 [Apologetic]	10	3.2
Type 3	😄 [Happy]	51	16.2	Type 4	🤢 [Sick]	6	2
Type 14	😭 [Crying]	45	14.3	Type 11	😳 [Embarrassed]	6	2
Type 1	😡 [Angry]	29	9.2	Type 12	😕 [Indecision]	4	1.4
Type 9	😞 [Confused]	22	7	Type 13	😇 [Innocent]	4	1.4
Type 6	🎉 [Playfulness]	15	4.8	Type 5	🙌 [Encouraging]	3	.9
Type 7	🌹 [Rose]	13	4.1	Type 8	😱 [Shocked]	3	.9

Examples # 3 and 4 illustrate specified and unspecified interlocutors, respectively:

➤ **Example # 3** (Specified Interlocutor)

- Female 10: آقای مدیر دعوا کجاست؟! بحثه...
[Mr. Admin, what's all this about?]
من حواسم هست دعوا نشه 🤨
[I'm on the alert in case of any arguments.]

➤ **Example # 4** (Unspecified Interlocutor)

- Male 1: بچه ها باورم نمیشه امتحان داریم... همش فک میکنم کنسل میشه
🤨🤨🤨
[Guys, I can't believe we're having a test . . . I keep thinking it's gonna be put off.]

As Table 3 shows, the male and female participants used 165 and 150 of the 315 total emoticons in turn. The females sent 24 emoticons to other female interlocutors, 73 to the male interlocutors, and 53 to the unspecified interlocutors, whereas the males sent 32 to other male interlocutors, 69 to the female interlocutors, and 64 to the unspecified interlocutors. On the other hand, the female and male participants received 93 and 105 of 198 emoticons, which were sent to the specified interlocutors, in turn. The females received 24 emoticons from other female interlocutors and 69 from the male interlocutors, whereas the males received 32 emoticons from other male interlocutors and 73 from the female interlocutors:

Table 3. *Frequency of Emoticons*

Emoticon Sender	Emoticon Receiver			Total
	Males	Females	Unspecified	
Males	32	69	64	165
Females	73	24	53	150
	105	93	117	315

Aiming at investigating the potential effect of the gender of emoticon senders/receiver on the type of emoticons they sent/received, we counted the frequency of each emoticon type used by the female and male participants separately (see Table 4). The male participants used all the 14 types of emoticons coded for this study, whereas the female participants used 11 types of emoticons. In addition, whereas the females sent six types of emoticons to other females and 11 types to the male interlocutors, the male participants sent six types of emoticons to other males and 11 types from the female interlocutors. The most frequent type of emoticon used by both the male and female participants was Type 2, that is, 🤨 (sarcastic). Emoticons which were not received by the female and male participants from their interlocutors can be found in Appendix:

Table 4. *Emoticons Sent by the Female and Male Participants*

Receiver	Female Sender				Male Sender			
	Females	Males	Unspecified	Total	Females	Males	Unspecified	Total
Emoticon								
Type 1	0	14	2	16	0	6	7	13
Type 2	10	18	22	50*	23	7	14	41*
Type 3	3	9	2	14	24	10	3	37
Type 4	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	6
Type 5	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	3
Type 6	1	8	1	10	2	0	3	5
Type 7	3	4	0	7	0	0	6	6
Type 8	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	2
Type 9	2	6	9	17	1	0	4	5
Type 10	0	4	2	6	3	0	1	4
Type 11	0	2	1	3	3	0	0	3
Type 12	0	2	0	2	1	1	0	2
Type 13	0	0	0	0	1	0	3	4
Type 14	5	5	14	24	9	0	22	31
Total	24	73	53	150	69	32	64	165
	16%	48.6%	35.3%		41.8%	19.4%	38.8%	

Some researchers have suggested that female's more frequent nonverbal displays, especially smiling, could be mirrored in their more frequent use of emoticons (Lee, 2003; Witmer & Katzman, 1997). Contrary to these and consistent with Huffaker and Calvert's (2005) findings, the results of this study reveal that, irrespective of the gender of the addressee, the male participants displayed more emotions than the females both in frequency and variation of emoticon types. However, regarding the effect of the gender of the addressee on the frequency and type of emoticons, our findings are consistent with Lee's (2003) finding and, contrary to Huffaker and Calvert's (2005) findings, we found gendered differences in both the female and male use of emoticons according to the gender of the addressee. Both the males and females used significantly more emoticons when interacting with interlocutors from the opposite gender. This may be explained by the fact that both genders think that in the absence of facial nonverbal displays, more explicit communication of emotions through emoticons may help the opposite sex not misinterpret their real intention.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study revealed that, irrespective of the gender of the addressee, the male participants displayed more emoticons than the females both in

frequency and variation of emoticon types. Given that the data set was collected from a digital forum whose members were all first-year medicine students, power and status relationships might not be the issue. The chat topic is a more likely candidate for the difference in the frequency of emoticons used by the males and females. The participants chatted about their upcoming psychology exam. Both the male and female participants used 😏 (sarcastic) more than any other emoticon. Further analysis of the chat script revealed that both the male and female participants accused each other of studying more than necessary; hence, they used 😏 (sarcastic) more frequently. In addition, the second more frequently used emoticons by the male and female participants were 😄 (happy) and 😭 (crying), respectively. The analysis of the chat script indicated that, contrary to the female students who used 😭 (crying) to prove that they were stressed out for not studying adequately, the male students used 😄 (happy) to show that they were relaxed with not being ready for the exam.

Moreover, we found gendered differences in both the female and male use of emoticons according to the gender of the addressee. Both the males and females used significantly more emoticons when interacting with interlocutors from the opposite gender. This gendered difference was not limited to the frequency of the emoticons; in fact, we found gendered differences in the type of emoticons the participants sent/received. For instance, the female participants sent 🌹 (rose) to both the male and female interlocutors, but the male participants did not send 🌹 (rose) to the specified male or female interlocutors. Culture and the social relations with the chat partner are the possible explanations regarding this gendered difference in the type of emoticon that participants sent and received. The participants in this study chatted with people they knew—their classmates—with whom they were friend or at least well acquainted. The male participants' responses to our enquiry about the reason for not sending 🌹 (rose) to the specified female or male interlocutors revealed that they did not send 🌹 (rose) to the female interlocutors not because they did not want to but because they were afraid of being misunderstood. Furthermore, they thought that sending 🌹 (rose) to a male participant is not a norm; therefore, they reserved 🌹 (rose) to the unspecified interlocutors. This culturally related explanation can be demonstrated through the following examples of the male participants' response to our e-mail enquiry:

➤ **Example # 5**

- Male 1: دختر خیلی زود احساسی میشن یه گل رز ببینن فک میکنن خبریه...
[Chicks get emotional in no time flat. They get delusional that something is up at the sight of a rose.]
- Male 6: گل رز نشانه عشقه دلم نميخاد واسم حرف در بیارن...
[Rose is the sign of love. I hate it if it's gonna set tongues wagging.]
- Male 5: واسه پسرها گل رز بفرستم؟؟؟؟
[Shall I send roses to the boys?]

Additionally, both the male and female participants' response to our e-mail enquiry revealed that if they had chatted with strangers, they would have been more relaxed in using any type of emoticon. This can be ascribed to the issue of the social relation of chat partners. If the participants had chatted with a person they did not know, the chat topics and conditions might have been changed, leading to a different pattern of emoticon use.

As the study was based on a limited data set, the observations cannot be seen as conclusive. Future research could investigate whether other samples may vary in regard to frequency and emoticon choices online. The study design was a text-based investigation. It might be possible to extend this investigation by enquiring into the intentions of the participants about using emoticons in their posts. Interviews might be designed so as to gain insights into why the participants make use of particular emoticons when interacting with male or female interlocutors.

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Appendix

Emoticons Not Received by the Female and Male Participants

Female Receiver		Male Receiver	
From Female Interlocutor	From Male Interlocutor	From Female Interlocutor	From Male Interlocutor
 (angry)			 (playfulness)
 (sick)			 (rose)
 (encouraging)	 (angry)	 (sick)	 (shocked)
 (shocked)	 (sick)	 (encouraging)	 (confused)
 (apologetic)	 (rose)	 (innocent)	 (innocent)
 (embarrassed)			 (embarrassed)
 (indecision)			 (innocent)
 (innocent)			 (crying)