A STUDY ON GENDER PERCEPTION OF EMOTICON IN COMPUTER MEDIATED COMMUNICATION (CMC).

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the gender perception of emoticon in computer mediated-communication (CMC) in the Southern American College classroom. Participants were 74 undergraduate students enrolled in a variety of courses at University of Alabama at Birmingham, Alabama, who are familiar with using emoticons in web based context. Results indicate that (a) there were no significant difference perception between male and female using positive emoticon in social context, (b) there were no significant difference between male and female using positive emoticon in positive message and (c) there are no significant difference between male and female especially in happy, humor and attitude towards the positive message with positive emoticon. Future research should continue to extend these efforts by examining the ways emoticon used in real situation as in web messenger, virtual forum or community portal, to better understand the spontaneous interactions between recipient and sender. (US version)

Technology enhances the way people communicate in the modern world. Communicating through the new channel of communication is becoming a trend in today's environment. There are many issues pertaining on this medium whereby gender bias has contributed to the sustainability of it. The usage of emoticon has tremendously well accepted by the user when the message can be understood clearly without face-to-face interaction. When we use it as if, the face of the sender is in front of the computer screen when receiver receives the message. However, the amount and consistency of emoticon used in daily communication is debatable. Thus, this study tried to investigate is there any significant difference between male and female recipient when they receive the message.

Keywords: *Computer mediated communication, emoticon. (Malaysia version).*

INTRODUCTION

Emoticon is the symbols that represent sender feeling or emotion in computer mediated communication (CMC). Created in 1982 by Scott E.Fahlman, emoticon has been widely used especially by young generation (Krohn, 2004) to strengthen the emotion, showing attitude and attention expression (Lo, 2008). Although it represents human face in a highly abstract way such as genderless, ethnic less and ageless (Smiljana, 2009), but emoticon can act as simulation of

recipient facial expression or body gestures. Nowadays, there are various emoticons that embedded in the software especially in messenger and social network sites.

The popularity of emoticons usage among computer user makes it unique and drives the interest for deeper understanding about it. With the latest evolution of emoticons exists on the internet, it is quite significant for cyber world users to grab many benefit out of it. Fuerthermore, computer-mediated communication provides more room for the emoticon to exists and play its vital role for the purpose to strengthen the meaning of a message. Communication can become more fluent and message can be delivered in a right time, right place and right meaning. This message is well understood by the recipient send by the sender.

By knowing the fact that nonverbal cues are crucial element in communication, as been proved by Mehrabian (1968), therefore emoticon becomes important to portray the nonverbal cues in CMC (Lo, 2008).   Extensive research has shown that emoticon been used to express personal ideas and feeling (Hulffaker & Calvert,2008), then people use it more with somebody they are familiar with (Derks, Bos & Grumbkow,2008), so that recipient would understand the right direction of sender emotion and expression (Lo, 2008).

Furthermore, when comparing the usage on emoticon between the genders, majority of female use it under humour category, whereas male use emoticon to express sarcasm (Wolf, 2000). Although it is clear that female perceived more trust than male in internet social site (Sun, Wiederbeck & Chintakovid, 2007), much less is known about gender perception when dealing with positive and negative message.

Due to the fact that function of emoticon in CMC is vital in improving meaning of the messages, it is highly hoped that this research will shed the light on emoticon use in social context and perception between genders especially in positive and negative message.   Consequently, this study attempt to answer: Is there any significant difference in gender when emoticons are used in social context and is there any significant difference in emoticons that conveys positive or negative emotion in computer-mediated communication?

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

There are several theories that relates to CMC. Social Presence Theory argued that CMC is lacked of nonverbal cues as compared to face to face (F-t-F) interaction. This is because in CMC, users communicate through text, sound and visual, thus elements such as sight, hearing and touch are minimal (Short, Williams & Christie, 1976). In fact, these elements are the factors that influence perception on the other person. By contrast, Biocca and Harms (2002), argued the theory's and stated that through media technologies, people can extend their social interaction and engaged with other people without being presence.

It is undeniable that emotions such as fear of rejection or run away from comfort zone, anger at social gatherings, or defensiveness in the face of perceived threats often emerge in one's face and would create such an improper manner that to certain extend can become critical situation. This

feelings is difficult to express in computer mediated communication and emoticons is the best channel to reflect the posting (Ziegahn, 2005).

It is somehow become norms in email correspondence when responses from participants, include emoticons that would solidify and strengthen the meaning of the messages (Reid, Petocz, & Gordon, 2008). It is undeniable that expressing facial expressions, phrasing, showing less concern on the grammar, punctuation and spelling in the form of writing would still troublesome to understand the true meaning. With the help of emoticons, the message becomes easily understood and would make the conveying message process smooth and accordingly.

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) in many of the literature argued that it is not rich as compared to the Face-to-face communication and sometimes it could be more liberal. After to a certain extend of time spent on communicating social information using CMC, it converges with the time spent verbally face-to-face (Joinson, 2003). This happens due to the fact that slower typing process rather than talking process and people have to spare time to understand the particular structure of the medium such as the use of abbreviation and emoticons, and also how people feel upon visual indicators (Gaimster, 2008).

No doubt that in email especially, is lacking in portraying emotion, hence, introduction of the emoticons and smiley faces help ones to convey the message more effective. The structure of the communication is getting easily understood. This practice is believed by Gaimster (2008) had become an extension of the abbreviation of LOL (laugh out loud) as example to indicate humour or emotion when the rest of the communication rely on text messages.

Although, Social Information Processing (SIP) theory agreed with the drawbacks in social presence during interaction on CMC, but claimed more messages and more time will bring relational effect as the same as in F-t-F interactions (Walther & D'Addario,2001).   According to this theory, "CMC user expressed more immediacy, similarity and composure than F-t-F counterparts" (Walther, 1995). He added, the reason was CMC users are more associate in social context especially in longtime relationship due to technology favorable in interpersonal relationship. By deriving principles from SIP theory of CMC, this study focuses on gender perception towards emoticon in social context.

EMOTICON IN SOCIAL CONTEXT

Conflicts sometimes arise due to the misunderstanding that occurs between sender and receiver. It happens because receiver does not get what it means by the actual intent of the sender. CMC also contribute to this problem when lacks of nonverbal cues resulting in disturbance of social context information where the cues are filtered out (Lo, 2008).

Lo (2008) study showed that most people cannot perceive the correct emotion, attitude and attention intents based on reading purely text messages without the emoticons. Perception of the messages starts to significantly change when emoticons added in context. Receiver showed severe difference when opposite meaning emoticons included in the message. Receiver managed

to understand the level and direction of emotion, attitude and attention expressions with the help of emoticon. Therefore, in social context emoticons plays it own roles.

Deficiency of social context cues while communicating through CMC has been regarded as both strengths and weaknesses. However, this becomes a challenge among CMC users to find social context cues actively in order to form impressions with whom they are communicating with (Byron & Baldridge, 2007). Therefore, emoticon plays a significant role in conveying message in CMC both to male and female users.

H1: Using emoticon in social context has significant difference between male and female recipient.

Emoticon Usage (based on Gender)

The argument whether the difference exists due to the usage of CMC is more than a chance occurrence. It is most likely to appear on specific conditions such as gender difference (Meij, 2007; Price, 2006; Wolf, 2000). Various case studies stated that male attitude towards CMC is predominantly task oriented whereas female more on person oriented. Price (2006) in her study on students' attitudes towards online courses found out that it is significantly higher for task orientation among female dispositions towards CMC. In fact, students of various universities when asked by Odell, Korgen, Schumacher, and Delucchi, (2000) indicated that strong preference among women rather than men for using internet for "school research", a type of task-oriented purpose.

In addition to nonverbal cues in CMC, Meij (2007) claimed that, female preferred to write longer message compare to male. In fact female used strengtheners henceforth (i.e. soooooo good) to showed expressiveness. However, male posted more emoticons in their own blogs (Huffaker & Calvent, 2005) and infrequent use it during interactions with the same gender (Lee, 2003).

In contrast, Wolf (2000) agrees that existence of a considerable amount of emoticons with 38 percent of all posts in mixed-gender newsgroups. She found out that men adjusted to the style used by their women counterparts in the newsgroup. Therefore, no gender difference can be obtained. Similarly with Jaffe, Lee, Huang and Oshagan (1999) that found there are no gender differences especially for emotional text, a mixture of emoticons and strengtheners. In fact, Huffaker and Calvert (2005) in their study reported that emoticons is highly use among teenagers with 63 percent of them use an emoticon at least once in their weblogs. They argue that no gender difference was found in their study.

Positive and negative message?

Since, gender difference and no gender difference issue is debatable, thus this study would like to find the reason of existence of the scenario that focus emoticon in social context. Hence:

H2: Using positive emoticon has significant difference between male and female recipient.

H3: Using negative emoticon has significant difference between male and female recipient

METHOD

Participants and Procedures

Data were collected as part of empirical study. Participants were 74 undergraduate students that enrolled courses in communication at a large university in the Southern of North America. The sample included 35 male and 39 female. Students volunteer were randomly assigned into one of scenarios: 36 (17 male and 19 female) were in positive message with smiley emoticon and the rest (18 male and 20 female) were in negative message with sad emoticon.

In scenario 1, students were given a set of questions with Seinfeld picture and positive quote from the series that was:

🙂

"I was sittin' there, making Cup-a-Soup, singing that song from The Lion King" Elaine Benes

In scenario 2, students were given a set of questions with Seinfeld picture and negative quote that was:

"Jerry's under a lot of pressure. It's hard being a stand-up comic, sometimes they don't laugh" Elaine Benes 🙁

Both quote from Elaine Benes as a controlled variable. Furthermore, in this study, we tried to establish the difference between positive and negative message. After reading the notations, then students were asked to evaluate the perception using seven-point semantic differential scales such as from very sad to very happy. Questionnaire design adopted from Walther (2001) and Derks (2007).

ANALYSIS

Independent t-test was conducted to determine if social context affected the male and female students. Also to examine is positive and negative message have significant difference between male and female students.

Table 1:
T-test on male and female perceptions in positive message and positive emoticon

Variable	Category	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	p
Social context	Male	17	4.706	2.054	1.529	64	0.136
	Female	19	3.526	2.568			
Happy	Male	17	5.206	1.062	-1.812	64	0.081
	Female	19	5.763	0.733			
Humor	Male	17	5.4118	.93934	0.212	64	0.833
	Female	19	5.3158	1.70139			
Attitude	Male	17	5.000	1.132	-1.564	64	0.128
	Female	19	5.553	0.970			
Ambiguity	Male	17	3.882	0.815	2.477	64	0.018*
	Female	19	3.211	0.810			

Based on Table 1, the Levine's Test for equality of variances was not significant for all variables, thus equal variances assumed were used to determine the t value. From Table 1, it was found that only ambiguity was significant with gender perception towards positive message.

Hypothesis 1 predicted using positive emoticon in social context would have significant difference perception between male and female were rejected. Hypothesis 2 predicted using positive emoticon in positive message would have significant difference perception between male and female also were rejected. There are no significant difference between male and female especially in happy, humor and attitude towards the positive message with positive emoticon. But there is significance difference in gender about ambiguity. Ratings for male (3.89) were higher than female (3.21), t=2.477 and p<0.005.

Table 2:
T-test on male and female perceptions on negative message and negative emoticon

Variable	Category	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	p
Social context	Male	18	4.611	1.883	-0.317	36	0.817
	Female	20	4.750	1.773			
Happy	Male	18	3.222	0.826	1.837	36	0.336
	Female	20	3.575	1.340			
Humor	Male	18	3.1111	1.529	-0.977	36	0.222
	Female	20	3.8000	1.880			
Attitude	Male	18	4.028	0.992	-1.244	36	0.753
	Female	20	4.150	1.368			
Ambiguity	Male	18	4.291	0.888	-0.233	36	0.074
	Female	20	3.750	0.928			

Based on Table 2, the Levine's Test for equality of variances was not significant for all variables, thus equal variances assumed were used to determine the t value. From Table 2, it was found that only ambiguity was significant with gender perception towards negative message.

Hypothesis 3 predicted using negative emoticon in negative message would have significant difference perception between male and female also were rejected. There are no significant difference between male and female especially in happy, humor and attitude towards the positive message with positive emoticon. But there is significance difference in gender about ambiguity. Ratings for male (4.291) were higher than female (3.750), t=-0.233 and p<0.005.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In an effort to address some of the issues surrounding the prudent use of emoticon in CMC, this study invested on emoticon usage among undergraduate students at a large university in the South of North America. Overall, the result showed that there is no significant difference between genders towards emoticon. It is proved that people use emoticon as a short cut to display emotions (Fisher, 2004), but male are rarely used it with the same gender (Lee, 2003). This pattern change when male and female interact in the same social group (Wolf, 2000). Therefore there are no differences in gender obtained.

Some remarks about emoticon can be made in general, students used emoticon to describe their emotions regardless the situation. In the positive contexts, students were rate higher in positive emoticon and also in negative contexts. These result consistent with Derks (2007) that examine the usage of emoticons in social context versus task oriented, and also supported by Lee and Wenger (2002). In addition, Derks (2007) claimed, it is easier to express negative emotions via CMC because the rejection risk is minimal and absent of facial feedback compare with FtF.

However the present study also has some limitations, the results should be interpreted within the limitation of the research design. Although emoticon have been approved as nonverbal cues in CMC (e.g., Walther & D'Addario, 2001; Derks et al., 2008; Lo, 2008), the limitations are associated with controlled groups. We should include groups that only access to positive or negative message without emoticon. Then we will be able to find the relationship between message with and without emoticon and look into the influence of emoticon as nonverbal cues. The second major limitation in this study is the used of convenient sample as undergraduate students within the certain group of age. Study should covered varies age or people that use emoticon to generalize the result. Even though, young generation finds out that emoticons are meaningful for them (Krohn, 2004), but nevertheless adult (Meij, 2008) appreciate the existence of it in the cyber communicating world.

Future researchers might also extend these efforts by examining the ways emoticon used in real situation as in web messenger, virtual forum or community portal, to better understand the spontaneous interactions between recipient and sender. In fact, how emoticon affects the behaviors either recipient or sender in communication over networks will become interesting subject to further clarify. As claimed by Yuasa, Saito and Mukawa (2006) human brain associate emoticon the same as vocal expression in enriches the human emotion and not as facial expression.

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