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Emoticons in Relational Writing Practices on WhatsApp: Some Reflections on Gender

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In 2015, Oxford Dictionaries chose face with tears of joy *as its Word of the Year.*

http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/press-releases/announcing-the-oxford-dictionaries-word-of-the-year-2015/

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P. Bou-Franch, P. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (eds.), *Analyzing Digital Discourse*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-92663-6_6

6.1 Introduction

Whereas early computer-mediated communication (henceforth, CMC) studies sought to find universal norms, today's CMC research looks at community-level, specific practice, as McKeown and Zhang (2015) posit. The study presented in this chapter investigates several online communities as entities of interest in their own right.

In the past, many online communities were formed because participants required the affordances the medium offered: anonymity and invisibility. Anonymity allows participants to feel less vulnerable and to open up more easily because what they say in the forum stays in the forum; it cannot be linked to the rest of their lives. Meanwhile, invisibility further disinhibits participant behavior since posters do not have to worry about how they look or sound, especially in online support groups that address physical or speech problems, as Barak, Boniel-Nissim, and Suler (2008) indicate. However, although online communities which favor anonymity still exist, today the internet is seen as a tool for self-promotion. This more recent phenomenon was observed by Jones and Hafner (2012), who also note that people now gather on social networking sites which encourage participants to reveal their "true" identities. Among these popular social networking services and instant messaging (henceforth, IM) applications, online communities interacting via WhatsApp[1] are particularly "real" because a user must provide their mobile phone number to be able to interact with others. Users must share this very private contact information with other participants in their WhatsApp chats; therefore, community participants frequently tend to be connected by strong ties. As Ling (2005) demonstrates, the circle of people with whom we are in regular contact by phone, by means of either calls or texts, is quite small. Other online communities on social networking platforms are generally larger. For example, Facebook users tend to have many "friends" because it is easy to find them by typing their names on the search window. However, as WhatsApp users share their private telephone numbers with each other, they are often linked by close social relationships and a shared relational purpose: to maintain those friendships. Other WhatsApp communities are formed by colleagues and members of clubs and political parties, among many others.

This study examines WhatsApp communities formed by close friends to see if the affordances of the medium, such as the enormous gallery of emoticons provided, determine their choices in writing style; particular attention will be given to the use of iconic elements in written practice.

Initially, the study focused on the difference between teenagers' and adults' use of emoticons. However, after processing an initial questionnaire on the habits of these WhatsApp users, the age variable appeared not to be significant. Other more interesting results were found regarding the gender variable, thus, the study was therefore redirected toward examining women's and men's participation in chat groups and their contrasting use of emoticons. Thurlow and Brown (2003) suggest it is hardly surprising that gender differences emerge in young people's interactions. In this chapter, we see how these gender differences manifest in adults' use of emoticons in WhatsApp interactions that take place in a Spanish context.

Few linguistic studies have examined emoticon use on new mobile applications in non-Anglophone contexts, and even less attention has been paid to gender differences in adults' use of emoticons. Two very recent exceptions are the doctoral dissertations by Al Rashdi (2015), concerning emoticons in WhatsApp messages written by Omani men and women in Arabic, and Sampietro (2016a), who provides an overview of how emoticons feature in messages written in Peninsular Spanish.

Bieswanger (2013) claims that authors publishing in English need to indicate whether they are describing computer-mediated English, language use in CMC, or modes of CMC in a language or particular languages other than English, or whether they are attempting to make universal claims as to patterns of language use in CMC in all languages. Far from seeking to generalize and make universal claims, this study attempts to shed light on the linguistic conventions of use of several communities communicating in Peninsular Spanish, and thus fill the gap in the literature regarding these conventions as displayed by users of new messaging applications for smartphones.

To contextualize the present study in the wider field of CMC research, the main findings of other relevant studies of texting and emoticons will be briefly reviewed in the next section.

6.2 Literature Review

6.2.1 Texting

The study of what Markman (2013) calls "text-based conversations" attracted the attention of academia at the beginning of the new millennium. However, despite this initial research, Thurlow and Poff (2013) contend that texting has been relatively underexamined by linguists in comparison to other modes or genres of CMC. The recent proliferation of messaging applications that run on smartphones and their relevance to our everyday lives seem to have caused resurgence in scholarly interest in this particular field (see, e.g. Ling & Baron, 2013).

In general, most studies have been conducted in the West and into Western languages. Scholars have focused on age and gender differences in English as well as in several other languages. Regarding the age variable, for example, Plester, Wood, and Joshi (2009) found that young texters were better at spelling than those young people who do not regularly use textisms.

As for the gender variable and texting, the study of gender similarities and differences in IM by Fox, Bukatko, Hallahan, and Crawford (2007) showed that women sent messages that were usually more expressive than those sent by men. Baron's study (2004) of IM yielded similar conclusions: women wrote longer texts and longer goodbyes than men, and they also used more emoticons. Ling (2005) studied SMS interactions in Norwegian and found that young girls wrote more complex SMSs than young boys. In general, these studies posit that female users of IM are more focused on building and maintaining relations with others through messaging applications than male users (Fox et al., 2007). On the whole, these studies conclude that the interlocutor's gender plays an important role in the speech style chosen.

Furthermore, many studies have revealed the relational character of SMS. For instance, texting is a tool to maintain and reinforce relationships (Ishii, 2006) or to initiate new ones (Ling, Julsrud, & Yttri, 2008) or is simply an arena in which to negotiate roles and relationships (Spilioti, 2011). These studies clearly demonstrate the social function of the technology (Thurlow & Poff, 2013).

In the case of Spanish, although extensive research has been done into chat interactions (e.g. Sanmartín, 2007), little work on written interactions via mobile phones is available, despite recent interest in this CMC mode. An exception is the ethnographic study conducted by Sabaté i Dalmau (2014) concerning transnational SMS practices among migrant people. Her study challenges the assumption that a certain level of competence is needed for successful communication in an information and communication technology (ICT) multilingual environment as texters in her sample are able to communicate effectively by creating their own intergroup lingua franca. Another interesting recent study is that by Vázquez-Cano, Mengual-Andrés, and Roig-Vila (2015) into the linguistic characteristics of teenagers' messages. The research concluded that the corpus presents orthotypographic and audiovisual characteristics conditioned by the size of device display, hours of conversation, and the relationship between speakers.

Notwithstanding these studies, Thurlow and Poff (2013) argue that a great deal of research in this area is still needed, especially into the interactions between adult texters.

6.2.2 Emoticons and Emoji

According to its definition, emoji is a loanword from Japanese defined as "a small digital image or icon used to express an idea or emotion in electronic communication". It is derived from the Japanese words "*e*" (picture) and "*moji*" (letter, character), whereas emoticon is derived from the English words "emotion" and "icon". Emoji are well established on many social media platforms. The affirmation that emoticons are used less frequently in online writings than tends to be believed is a long-established conclusion of CMC research (Baron, 2008; Herring, 2012; Pérez-Sabater, Turney, & Montero-Fleta, 2008; Thurlow & Poff, 2013). For example, in Baron's (2008) data, emoticons used in texting and IM were <1% of the words studied. This situation has dramatically changed over the last few years with the increasing use of graphical means of communication such as emoji, stickers, and GIFs to supplement images on online writing. The increase in their use stems mainly from the incorporation of large emoji

galleries into messaging applications such as WhatsApp and Facebook messenger. They are continuously evolving, and, although Stark and Crawford (2015) noted that there are "many white emoji faces, hands, and body parts" (p. 7), they no longer represent only white and heterosexual cultures. For example, WhatsApp has just included pictures of same-sex families and users can choose the skin color of many of the images. Stickers, on the other hand, known as "next-level emoji" (Stark & Crawford, 2015), are proprietary to the platform that sells them. For the purpose of this research, emoticons or emoji will be referred to indistinctly throughout the text, since the distinction between these graphical icons is not relevant here. Moreover, most research to date employs the term "emoticons" predominantly to refer collectively to new emoticons, traditional ASCII emoticons, and emoji (see, e.g. Yus, 2014).

The use of emoticons has traditionally been related to sociolinguistic factors such as gender, age, and CMC mode (Bieswanger, 2013). Many studies consistently highlighted the relationship between women and emoticon use. For instance, Wolf (2000) discovered that women used emoticons more than men in online newsgroups. Similarly, Baron (2004, 2008) found that women included emoticons more often than men when communicating via IM. Likewise, in her study of blogs, Nishimura (2015) concluded that gender is the most salient factor in explaining the difference of usage in Japanese: younger women employ emoticons far more frequently than older women and men, and old men far less frequently than all other users. Nishimura also emphasized that topic is a determining factor for emoticon use: they are more appropriate for expressing the "brighter aspects of life" (Nishimura, 2015). In Kapidzic and Herring (2011), girls used more emoticons than boys in teenagers' chat rooms, especially those representing smiles and laughter. Exceptions to these studies are found in Huffaker and Calvert (2005), whose analysis showed that male teenagers used flirty emoticons more than girls in blogs, and in Maíz Arévalo (2014), whose male participants on Facebook messenger were more emotional than their female counterparts. Her research revealed that males make frequent use of the sad face emoticon because they are affectively protected by the screen, a fact that allows them to express their emotions more freely than they would in a face-to-face conversation.

As for the mode variable, whereas in other modes of CMC, such as email, the general absence of emoticons is of academic interest (see, e.g.

Pérez-Sabater et al., 2008 for lack of emoticons in a large corpus of academic emails, or Lee, 2007), emoticons are now increasingly common in the corpora of messages exchanged through new mobile IM applications. For example, Al Rashdi's (2015) corpus of WhatsApp messages from Omani participants in two chat groups contains so many emoji that, in her view, they can be considered as a defining feature of Omani WhatsApp interactions, although, as she indicates, her two corpora may not be truly comparable. It is also interesting to note that the Omani women studied use far more iconic elements than men in men-only groups. Al Rashdi also found that some emoji are only used by men, for example, the *thumbs-down* representation or the policeman, while women predominantly employ the *kissing face*. Similarly, Sampietro's (2016a) empirical research revealed that 50% of her corpus included an emoticon. The conclusions of her doctoral dissertation state that men make less frequent use of the *face throwing a kiss* emoticon, an emoji which is almost a conventionalized farewell, because men rarely kiss each other to open or close face-to-face encounters in Spain[2] (except in some social contexts, such as among families and gay male groups). Despite these conclusions, Sampietro's main concern is that emoticons should be studied as part of a more comprehensive approach to multimodal communication, and that the inclusion of emoticons should be considered a meaningful choice. Finally, Sampietro also notes that some linguistic studies evaluate sociolinguistic differences in emoticon usage relying on nonrepresentative corpora, or corpora which are not truly comparable.

In light of the above, this research addresses these concerns by analyzing gender differences in a comparable corpus of men-only and women-only chat groups formed by close friends. Two social categories highlighted by Bieswanger (2013) are the basis of this study: gender similitudes and differences in emoticon use, and the role of mode choice, specifically WhatsApp, one of the new mobile applications for smartphones.

The research questions this study aims to answer are as follows:

1. Is the relationship between emoticon use and gender still relevant in WhatsApp?
2. To what purpose are these emoticons used in closed single-gendered communities?

6.3 Methodology, Participants, Parameters Studied, and Delimitation of Study

6.3.1 Methodology

The methodology for the study follows that suggested by Orgad (2006) and Spilioti (2011) for the analysis of online data on breast cancer communities and SMS interactions, respectively. Basically, these studies involved the use of online and offline data. In the present analysis, three types of texts were taken into consideration: an online questionnaire about emoticons on WhatsApp, case studies of online texts, and face-to-face interviews with a selection of the participants in the study. The discourse analysis of online interactions was contextualized by the offline data taken from the interviews, while the questionnaire worked as an anonymous source of information and an initial point of departure. Different sources were used to collect and generate good-quality data to answer the research questions. In the methodology employed by Orgad, no hierarchy was imposed on the different texts; consequently, online and offline data were treated as interwoven rather than separate entities. However, in this study, the questionnaire was used to delimit the scope of the study since, as will be described below, the unexpected questionnaire results were decisive in reorienting the research.

Orgad (2006) suggests that researchers must ask themselves questions concerning the adequacy and usefulness of these combined methods. In other words, academics should ask themselves whether obtaining offline data could reveal important information about the context under study, which would otherwise be impossible to obtain through other means. In this case, the results obtained offline were used to triangulate those obtained online and vice versa. Interviews with participants were very revealing and useful in helping contextualize their text messages, while the study of text messages was decisive in gaining a fuller understanding of what participants said in their interviews and in the questionnaire, as discussed in the results section.

The questionnaire was subjected to statistical analysis. A mean comparison using ANOVA was undertaken. The variability of emoticon use according to gender and age was studied for the ANOVA study.

6.3.2 Participants

The questionnaire was distributed among 400 participants ($n \approx 400$): 200 teenage daily users of WhatsApp groups (100 females and 100 males) and 200 adult daily users of WhatsApp groups (100 females and 100 males). It consisted of a five-point Likert scale about the frequency of emoticon use in WhatsApp messages.

A reduced number of individuals (23 people) from among the questionnaire respondents volunteered to participate in the research. They were interviewed, and also provided examples of their real written WhatsApp exchanges to be examined by the researcher. In total, eight chat threads were selected from the corpus provided: four from men-only groups and four from women-only groups made up of close friends, whose constant message exchanges constitute only a snapshot of a long interaction over many years, as in Spilioti's study (2011). In detail, this chapter is based on a total dataset of 2087 messages/utterances gathered in 2015 from 47 participants, volunteers, and their friends (7 groups formed by 6 people and 1 group formed by 5), aged 35 to 49. This age range for adults was chosen following the methodology of the WhatsApp, Switzerland research project (www.whatsup-switzerland.ch). The total number of words in the corpus is 8556, which means there is an average of 4.1 words per message. In this regard, it is necessary to explain that, unlike Al Rashdi's (2015) data analysis, in this corpus, emoticons were counted as words following Baron (2008), who considers them to be *lexical issues*.

The text messages collected were overwhelmingly relational in their orientation, ranging from friendly salutations to social arrangements, or substantial friendship maintenance. They were basically one-to-many texts sent and received in a closed online community formed by friends. Moreover, it is important to clarify that all the examples presented and discussed are from naturally occurring private electronic discourse exchanged between friends. They were provided by participants in the study who gave permission for their use.[3] None of the group members knew in advance that their WhatsApp conversations would be used in the study; therefore, these conversations are unelicited and actually occurring.

6.3.3 Delimitation of the Study

Initially, in accordance with the literature on texting, the study sought to examine whether there were any significant differences between teenagers' and adults' online interactions in the use of emoticons and emoji. In other words, the object of research was whether the age of the interactants influenced the use of these iconic elements in their online texts.

After the results of the questionnaires were analyzed statistically, practically no differences between teenagers' and adults' use of emoticons were found but there was significant difference in the way men and women included emoticons in their chat groups. Consequently, the research was redirected toward the observation of the distinct participation of both genders in their online communities. In particular, the study focused on men-only and women-only online communities.

The threads are analyzed using the systematic taxonomy of the pragmatic functions of iconic elements developed by Yus (2014). He classified the pragmatic functions of emoticons into eight categories that range from signaling the propositional attitude underlying the utterance, which would be difficult to identify without the aid of the emoticon, to adding a feeling or emotion toward the communicative act. On the whole, these categories correspond "to the different ways in which emoticons satisfy the user's search for relevance" (Yus, 2014, p. 511). These emoticonical expressions of attitudes can reveal the general underlying stance of the user. In the next section, this taxonomy will often be referred to explain the examples discussed.

In this corpus, Yus's taxonomy is applied to what has been named *coordination activities* (Ling, 2005) or *micro coordination* (Ling & Baron, 2013). The most common themes used in SMS are coordination, information, answers, grooming, and others such as questions and requests (Ling, 2005). The analysis of the eight cases selected and mentioned above is restricted to those excerpts devoted to coordination activities such as making arrangements with other close friends. CMC studies on the function of emoticons pointed out that emoticons are known to be used more frequently in socioemotional contexts than in task-oriented contexts; for example, we use these iconic elements habitually in environments where

there is camaraderie or friendship between participants, and in tight-knit groups than in more neutral scenarios such as the workplace (Derks, Bos, & von Grumbkow, 2007). Yus (2011) explains that IM users are more likely to express feelings and emotions by means of emoticons when communicating with intimate friends, whereas emoticons are absent from exchanges among mere acquaintances.

Attempting to analyze WhatsApp exchanges without this type of clear focus would be fraught with many methodological problems and make a comparison between genders impossible.

In the next section, interactional sociolinguistics is used to interpret the findings. Further, in light of previous research on emoticons, some explanations for their use are proposed. In conclusion, the broader implications of the growing use of emoticons in social media for relational maintenance and in-group identification are considered.

6.4 Results and Their Interpretation

The questionnaire asking whether respondents include emoticons in messages (1 for never, 2 for seldom, 3 for sometimes, 4 for very often, and 5 for always) revealed that, although no great differences exist in the routines of teenagers and adults when participating in their online communities, there is indeed a clear dissimilarity in the way men and women interact in these environments. This is represented in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1 clearly demonstrates that the difference in the use of emoticons by subjects' gender is statistically significant. Thus, as mentioned above, the study was subsequently reoriented to a discourse analysis of parts of these chats to examine gender differences in as much detail as possible, focusing specifically on threads that deal with coordination activities in men-only and women-only groups of adult users aged 35–49.

Generally, the discourse analysis of these excerpts from WhatsApp chat threads dedicated to coordination tasks corroborates the statements of questionnaire participants and shows the following: women include emoticons profusely in their messages, while men make sparse use of the wide gallery provided by the messaging company.[4]

Table 6.1 Mean table with the results of the questionnaire[a]

Gender	Age		Use of emoticons
Men	Teenagers	Mean	2.67
		Std. dev.	1.397
	Adults	Mean	2.93
		Std. dev.	0.730
	Total	**Mean**	**2.79**
		Std. dev.	1.114
Women	Teenagers	Mean	4.47
		Std. dev.	0.743
	Adults	Mean	4.25
		Std. dev.	0.775
	Total	**Mean**	**4.35**
		Std. dev.	0.755
Total	Teenagers	**Mean**	**3.57**
		Std. dev.	1.431
	Adults	**Mean**	**3.63**
		Std. dev.	0.999
	Total	Mean	3.60
		Std. dev.	1.224

[a]The mean comparison using ANOVA shows that the *p*-value was lower than 0.001, which indicates that there is significant difference between the results. This attests the validity of the analysis carried out

To illustrate this finding, let us now observe in detail some extracts dedicated to organizing a meal out.

In this thread (Table 6.2), there is no introduction or farewell; men go straight to the point and simply agree or disagree with the proposal. Their style could be defined as brisk and short, as seen in Ling, Baron, Lenhart, and Campbell's (2014) study of male teenagers' texts. This example also shows that the participants in the group are close friends, since no surnames are added to the names of the members, and one friend, *Manolín*, is identified with a diminutive, suggesting that the owner of the telephone may have known him since childhood. The time sequence is worth observing as well: they start to organize the event in the early evening for the same day, although they may have had a previous face-to-face meeting where they agreed on the day of the get together. What is significant is that they start this online coordination activity on Sunday at 18:19 and finish the same day at 21:17, with their capacity diminished by alcohol intake (utterance 11: "we are all blotto"). The only

Table 6.2 Example 1. A group of close male friends organizing a meal out, with English translation[a]

Utterance	Day	Time	Message	Translation
1	Sun	18:19	Julio: Siete y algo vamos pallaaaaa	Julio: we'll go there around seven
2	Sun	18:50	Hugo: Oki	Hugo: okay
3	Sun	19:31	Julio: Hoy pizaaas	Julio: pizzas today
4	Sun	19:31	Julio: Vesubio y napolitana?	Julio: Vesuvius and Napolitana?
5	Sun	19:32	Lino: Si, se lo has dicho a Manolo?	Lino: Yes, did you tell Manolo?
6	Sun	19:59	Manolín: Voy	Manolín: I'm coming, coming
7	Sun	19:59	Manolín: Y quesos	Manolín: and cheese
8	Sun	20:03	Julio: A menos cuarto aqui	Julio: be here at quarter to
9	Sun	20:03	Julio: Y me llevas	Julio: and give me a lift
10	Sun	20:05	Manolín: 👍	Manolín: okay emoticon
11	Sun	21:17	Julio: Ya estamoooos torpedooos	Julio: we are all blotto
12	Sun	21:17	Hugo: Voy cagando leches	Hugo: I'll peddle to the metal
13	Sun	21:17	Hugo: Que los nanos me tienen machacao	Hugo: the kids have knackered me out

[a]These excerpts have been chosen because they are clear representative examples of the corpus gathered

graphical element displayed is the *thumbs-up* sign, a recurrent indicator of approval commonly used by men in the corpus studied (see, e.g. Sampietro, 2016b, for a study dedicated to this graphical element). This is usually a stand-alone emoji that commonly closes an utterance with a strong informal character (Sampietro, 2016b).

Example 1 reflects what sociologists call "lad culture" or "laddish behavior", a term usually applied to British heterosexual groups of middle class, young boys, young adults, and often middle-aged men who reinforce their masculinity by alcohol consumption, objectifying women, and liking and playing sport (Francis, 1999; Wheaton, 2004). In this sociological context, there does not seem to be a place for smiley faces and kisses; group identity is performed through a complete absence of smiling or winking little faces.

Let us now turn our attention to another representative example of coordination activities, but this time by a group of close female friends organizing a meal out for the weekend (Tables 6.3 and 6.4):

Table 6.3 Example 2. Part one of an exchange among women organizing a meal out with the English translation on the right

Utterance	Day	Time	Message	Translation
1	Tue	18:54	Rochi: Hola, propngo grupos para la comida y q cada una elija, vale? Somos 11 adultos G1: vasos, platos, cubiertos, aperitivos G2: bebidas G3: postre G4, 5 y 6, comida, jeje (ensaladas de pasta, tortilla patata, empanadas … lo q se os ocurra) Empieza la eleccion! Besitis😘	Rochi: Hello, I suggest groups for lunch and each of us can choose, ok? We are 11 adults G1: glasses, plates, cutlery, starters G2: drinks G3: desert G4, 5, and 6 food (pasta salads, Spanish omelets, pies … whatever you come up with) Start choosing Kisses (diminutive)
2	Tue	19:14	Blanca: Si queréis yo m pongo en el 3 y seguro q alguien se alegra, jeje 😜😜😜😜😜	Blanca: If you want, I'll go into group 3 and I'm sure someone will be happy, haha

Table 6.4 Example 3. Part two of an exchange among women organizing a meal out with the English translation on the right

Utterance	Day	Time	Message	Translation
1	Tue	23:13	Xtina: Bueno xicas, os dejo me voy a la camita, mañana seguimos con el tema menu!!! Sigo con dudas!!!! Bona nit 😘😘	Xtina: Right girls, I'm off to bed, we'll continue with the menu stuff tomorrow!!! I'm still not sure about all the details!!!! Goodnight
2	Wed	08:24	Laura: Es verdad … x q no encargamos una paella???? 😊	(The next morning) Laura: You're right … why don't we order a paella???

In this thread, the women start to coordinate the organization of the event on a Tuesday at 18:45 and continue their conversation during the evening and into the following day. However, things take a turn in the morning when they suggest canceling the meal plans they made so far and ordering takeaway paella instead. Their style can be described as lengthy and full of unnecessary elements at a purely transactional or informational level: there are many emoticons and often more than one per utterance, as seen in Al Rashdi's (2015) corpus. It can also be observed that these emoticons usually occupy a final sentence position. According to Yus's (2014) taxonomy, the emoticons in these excerpts are simply used to communicate the intensity of a feeling or an emotion that has already been encoded verbally, for example, in the case of "kisses" followed by a *face throwing a kiss* emoticon (Example 2, utterance 1), an emoticon included frequently in women's chats, as seen in Al Rashdi's (2015) study, or "haha" followed by several winking smiley faces (Example 2, utterance 2). This excerpt also presents many of the traditional textual features historically associated with CMC such as reduplication of punctuation marks, phonetic orthography, and other strategies of oralized written texts (Yus, 2011) or what Thurlow (2007) calls "textese" language. In parallel with informality, the text is well organized and follows some patterns of formal writing with paragraph divisions, use of accents and punctuation marks, commas, and brackets. Furthermore, this short text contains one case of code switching: the use of *Bona nit* (the Catalan phrase for goodnight). Scholars have suggested that code switching is more common in face-to-face oral communication than in writing (Li, 2002). Chat messaging applications seem to be designed to simulate the immediacy and interactivity of face-to-face conversation, consequently this "motivates multilingual users to code-switch as they would do in a conversation" (Lee, 2011, p. 11). In these examples, code switching, together with other strategies such as code-alternation, switching to both formal and informal varieties, is a clear strategy to reinforce affective ties, construct participant alliances, and support playfulness (Georgakopoulou, 2011). Finally, as in Example 1, the absence of a surname in the identification of the members attests to the close friendships between the chat members, as does the abbreviation of the name of one of the friends, with *Cristina* spelt *Xtina* by the owner of the mobile phone.

Table 6.5 Example 4. Male coordination chat to watch a film

Line	Day	Time	Message	Translation
1	Thu	19:59	Pepe: Yeeeeee diez y cuarto?	Pepe: Wasssuuuup 10:30?
2	Thu	20:14	Miguel: Luis pilla la peli Horns	Miguel: Luís, get the film Horns
3	Thu	20:15	Luís: Ok Pepe	Luís: Ok, Pepe
4	Thu	20:15	Hector: Yo no	Hector: I can't
5	Thu	20:16	Manolo: Yo no puedo :(	Manolo: I can't :(

Turning to another conversation between men (Table 6.5), in which a group of middle-aged men are arranging to meet to watch a film, we observe considerable differences when compared to the previous female coordination examples.

Similarly to Example 1, this men-only chat reflects the briskness of male interactions, in the sense that there are usually no greetings or farewells, and many imperative forms, although, in this case, we can see some sort of greeting by means of a very colloquial "Yeeeee", an equivalent of the English "Wassuuup". This short text also exemplifies another salient point that has surfaced in the study and which requires further research with a broader corpus: traditional text-deformation emoticons (Yus, 2014) are used only by men. Here, the *sad face* emoticon adds a feeling or emotion toward the propositional content of the utterance, the example exhibits a negative emotion (sadness) that the user feels toward the information provided by the propositional content of the utterance. The emoticon occupies the final position in the thread, one of the most habitual positions of emoticons according to Sampietro (2016a). This group usually adopts ASCII emoticons as a sign of group identity, as a unique social language shared by the group members to create shared and secret uniqueness (Kelly & Watts, 2015). In the interviews, some of the group members said they work as engineers and computer scientists, and this may be the reason why they chose traditional emoticons to construct group identity.

Regarding interview findings, participants underlined the conversational character of these written interactions. The men interviewed emphasized the fact that these chats between close friends are continuously active, what Spilioti (2011) calls the frame of "perpetual contact" in mobile technologies. Consequently, there is no need to use what the

interviewees call "unnecessary elements", such as introductions, farewells, and emoticons to maintain affective ties in this maximum speed, minimum effort communication medium. The structure of these never-ending conversations among men appears to coincide with findings of other studies which highlight the conversational frame of texting and its adherence to conversational rather than prescriptive forms for writing (e.g. Thurlow & Poff, 2013).

In the interviews with women, however, the "unnecessary" elements were reported to be indispensable. WhatsApp messages without salutations or closings may sometimes be considered inadequate but those without emoji are definitely believed to look brusque and even rude, as also reported by Al Rashdi (2015). Another interesting opinion expressed in these semi-structured interviews was that online practices reflect similar face-to-face interactions. As Yus (2014) states, these online exchanges mirror face-to-face interactions: women kiss each other in face-to-face meetings and in their WhatsApp exchanges, whereas men only kiss other men when they are members of their family or in groups of gay male friends.[5] This stands in stark contrast to Al Rashdi's (2015) results, which show that men and women include the *face throwing a kiss* emoticon repeatedly in their messages because, in Oman, men and women kiss and hug each other when they greet their same-sex friends in person. This brings to the fore what Derks et al. (2007) note: emoji use is heavily influenced by linguistic and social contexts, and by both cultural and personal conventions. The results show the need to add gender and personal or group conventions to this statement, as crucial elements in determining emoticon preference.

Overall, the distinction between men's report talk and women's rapport talk (Tannen, 1991) is not applicable to the cases examined, as both genders use these communities mainly for relational purposes. The detailed discourse analysis of the written messages shows that although the relational function is at the heart of all of them, it is expressed differently in men's and women's chats. Whereas men usually go straight to the point, women habitually introduce their texts with a salutation or addressivity, and also interrupt their written conversations with graphic emoticons, which function as community conventions which are used with the intention of building intimacy. It seems that texters in women-only groups

need emoticons to build relationships, while their male counterparts feel no need to emphasize or build an already-existing relationship by using what they consider to be unnecessary elements. Moreover, the analysis demonstrates that friends and peer groups establish their own local stylistic norms. As in the study of Thurlow and Poff (2013), the groups of friends under scrutiny here are able to creatively transform multimodal digital literacy resources to construct group identities. Yus (2014) observes that in the chatrooms he analyzed, emoticons and emoji simply generate a colorful visual arrangement of the text "so that the message typed 'stands out from the textual crowd' and arouses an interest in the other users" (p. 513). In most female chats studied here, emoticons are used simply to communicate the intensity of a feeling or emotion that has already been coded verbally, for example, "kisses" followed by a *face throwing a kiss* emoticon (Example 2, utterance 1), or to add a feeling or emotion toward the communicative act itself, as in Example 3, utterance 2 (Yus, 2014). In other words, female participants use emoticons to emphasize belonging to the group regardless of content. The excerpts examined suggest that men and women desire to build friendships and enhance their relationships through the technology. In this context, emoticons, as Maíz Arévalo (2014) argues, work as group solidarity and rapport boosters, mirroring face-to-face interactions (Yus, 2014).

A recent article by Kelly and Watts (2015) underlines how emoji are appropriated in mediated discourse. Following Dix (2007), they define "appropriation" as "usage that lies beyond a designer's original intent" (Kelly & Watts, 2015). Beyond the role of emoticons for conveying emotional states, they discuss three categories of appropriation: to maintain a conversational connection, to permit play, and to create shared and secret uniqueness. For example, emoticons are used to control a thread or to encourage playful behavior so as to maintain social bonds among participants. Specifically, in close personal relationships such as those among interactants in this corpus, Kelly and Watts (2015) suggest that emoji are used to maintain connections. They give the example of emoji sent by the recipient to acknowledge a message, which prevents the sender from feeling ignored due to a lack of response. They can also serve to promote feelings of intimacy within the context of a relationship.

This is also in line with Jones and Hafner's (2012) claim that users of mobile communication, especially young people, do not use the technology to exchange information but to exchange friendship. Similarly, in their study of texting between teenagers, Berg, Taylor, and Harper (2005) compare text messages to the practice of gift giving.

In this relational function of the technology, academic studies have highlighted that women often employ mediated communication for relationship maintenance (Colley, Todd, White, & Turner-Moore, 2010). Women use texting for social purposes, while men's texting is more instrumental; in other words, women see the smartphone as a social channel, whereas men view it as a mere tool (Ling et al., 2014). However, this does not appear to be the case for the messages studied in this chapter since male-only communities also use their mobile phones for relationship maintenance, although these relationships are maintained differently and their exchanges are stylistically different from those of the female-only communities. Building on Stark and Crawford (2015), it can be affirmed that emoji and emoticons have become decisive elements in the affective mix of relationship maintenance, sustenance, and continuation, especially in women's chats.

Finally, although the affordances of mobile technologies can enhance the use of stylistic elements such as emoticons, a simplistic deterministic approach should be avoided. In spite of the immense gallery of graphic elements available, men include them infrequently in their chats, while women, in contrast, make abundant use of them. One plausible reason for this imbalance is that women tend to use standard language more often than their male counterparts, along the lines argued by Squires (2012) regarding IM and gender variation. Therefore, bearing Squires's (2012) ideas in mind, it could be claimed that the use of standard language on WhatsApp involves the usage of all the affordances provided by this application, namely a large, continuously updated gallery of emoticons, emoji, and stickers. Indeed, in the eight cases examined, women appear to be adopting standard language practices that require an abundant use of emoticons. It seems that "there is something *feminine* about conforming to standard written expectations in this medium, and/or something *masculine* about not conforming" (Squires, 2012, p. 312).

6.5 Conclusions

The findings show that gender-based differences persist in communications via internet-based IM applications, specifically WhatsApp. The study reveals that stereotypes regarding gendered emotional expression are also present in exchanges taking place via online messaging applications. On the other hand, within the debate of the sensitiveness of CMC to technological and social constraints (Lorenzo-Dus & Bou-Franch, 2013), the examples provided demonstrate that the affordances of WhatsApp do not determine the actions of users: we have seen that women employ galleries of emoticons profusely to maintain their already close friendships, whereas men do not; men maintain their relationships by omitting what they consider to be superfluous elements.

With regard to emoticon interpretation, it must be noted that there is no difficulty in interpreting the emoticons in these threads, as may be the case in other studies, since graphic representations in this corpus are mainly kisses, winks, and flowers. Here, unlike in other studies on social networking and IM (e.g. Maíz Arévalo, 2014), the participants form a homogeneous audience who share the same degree of (in)formality and consider the use of emoticons in their community appropriate. The study of other communities may yield results that could reveal problems associated with emoticon contextualization and interpretation of their function.

The study is, of course, limited. A large multinational comparative project such as the one currently underway in Switzerland (www.whatsup-switzerland.ch) would be required to provide results with a wider scope, which could account for the greater variability between texters and the messages they send.

How men and women interact in men-only and women-only groups has been analyzed in this chapter. Future studies could analyze how participants in mixed groups accommodate their writing practices to those of the other gender. Research into online accommodation has indicated that a common feature of online groups, which is similar to face-to-face interaction, is that online members accommodate to each other (Pérez-Sabater, 2017).

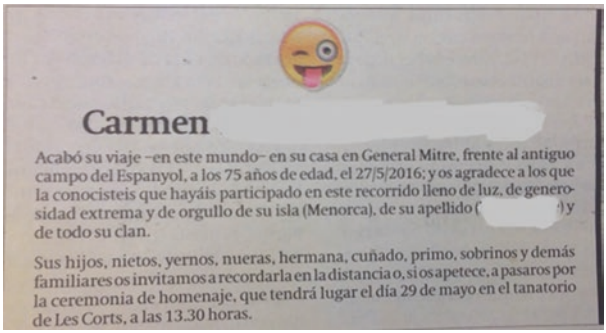
However, despite its limitations, this study has provided a first glimpse into some communities that use the WhatsApp messaging application and can be seeing as a starting point for further investigations in this promising

CMC field, where technological developments advance rapidly. WhatsApp is constantly growing and adopting new channels and new facilities, which may make these results obsolete almost overnight, as explained by Spooren and van Charldorp (2014). We must be aware that the factors that influence the adoption and usage of new technologies are complex and sometimes unpredictable. However, as the primary objective of WhatsApp is to enable communication, the need to interact will trigger the adoption of another popular messaging service with similar affordances, making the research published in this article scholarly relevant again.

As a final remark, it is necessary to clarify that these WhatsApp groups seem to be formed, to a great extent, by heterosexual participants. The study of other chat groups formed by lesbian and gay male participants, or those with different gender identities, may yield different results which may help us understand gender similarities and differences in language use in messaging applications. Another issue to note is that this sample is not systematic, and, since it was not selected at random from a larger pool of chats, the findings cannot be extrapolated and applied to the general populace of users. The analysis can only show how some online communities interact. Future studies, which may involve several researchers and/or a larger corpus, could yield more general outcomes.

Lastly, future research can involve the study of emoticons in public discourse. As a striking example of how emoticons are increasingly occupying public spaces these days, the obituary shown below published in *El Periódico de Catalunya* on 28 May 2016 features the *winking face* emoticon in the space traditionally occupied by the Christian cross in Spanish obituaries.[6] An obituary featuring an emoticon would have been inconceivable a few years ago. In the threads analyzed, women are shown to incorporate emoji profusely in their interactions, and, in line with the findings, this obituary is to announce the death of a woman who requested that the emoticon be included in her death notice. In previous research about mourning sites on Facebook, such as the one for the death of Steve Jobs (Holiman, 2013), emoticons were often incorporated into the text to express emotion, usually a sad face; in other corpora, however, such as the one examined by Giaxoglou (2014), there is a clear lack of pictorial elements. In Spain, where tradition has excluded humor from mourning ceremonies, this emoticon appearing in the header of an obituary is an example of the ongoing evolution of newspaper obituaries toward less

formal styles, as documented by Ollanquindia (1998), and is intimately related to a broader tendency in the general evolution of literacy and public discourse toward informality (Montero-Fleta, Montesinos-López, Pérez-Sabater, & Turney, 2009):



Carmen

Acabó su viaje –en este mundo– en su casa en General Mitre, frente al antiguo campo del Espanyol, a los 75 años de edad, el 27/5/2016; y os agradece a los que la conocisteis que hayáis participado en este recorrido lleno de luz, de generosidad extrema y de orgullo de su isla (Menorca), de su apellido ( ) y de todo su clan.

Sus hijos, nietos, yernos, nueras, hermana, cuñado, primo, sobrinos y demás familiares os invitamos a recordarla en la distancia o, si os apetece, a pasaros por la ceremonia de homenaje, que tendrá lugar el día 29 de mayo en el tanatorio de Les Corts, a las 13.30 horas.

Acknowledgments Thanks to the editors, Patricia and Pilar, and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions that have greatly improved the original manuscript. Special gratitude to my colleague and friend Begoña Montero-Fleta for her help in processing the questionnaire and the corpus.

Notes

1. According to the United Nations, mobile broadband is the most dynamic market segment; globally, mobile broadband penetration reached 47% of the world population in 2015 (http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/facts/default.aspx accessed 12 September 2015). In September 2015, Jan Koum, the founder of WhatsApp, announced on Facebook that it had 900 million monthly active users.
2. In Spain, conventional face-to-face greetings and farewells among friends involve kissing the person you are meeting twice, once on each cheek.
3. All examples reproduced in this article are from the corpus gathered. Participants' telephone numbers have been removed to protect their privacy.
4. Men include an emoticon in 17% of their utterances, while women include them in 82%. However, since only the parts of this corpus devoted

to organizing events have been examined in detail, no more detailed statistics will be given with regard to occurrences and type of emoticon per utterance. This quantitative analysis has been left for another time.

5. The case studies analyzed are chats between heterosexual participants, as participants declared in the interviews. The analysis of gay male groups may yield different results related to the use of the *face throwing a kiss* emoticon.
6. Used with kind permission of *El Periódico de Catalunya*.

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