
Liking in Group Messaging: Perception versus Meaning

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Group messaging has become a large part of our society. As a result, many new features have been added to group messaging applications, including the like button. There has been much research into group messaging and liking in social media, but there is not much research on the meaning of the like button in group messaging. I intend to compare the meaning of the like button in group messaging to college student perceptions of the meaning behind liking. I conducted a survey and analyzed transcripts of group messages. The survey revealed that most people see liking as a form of approval or a response to something funny while the transcript analysis revealed that there were many reasons behind using the like button, demonstrating that perceptions of liking did not always reflect the meaning behind the like. Additionally, the transcript analysis revealed that liking had different meanings depending on the context.

Introduction

In recent years, cell phone applications and social media use have become huge parts of our society. With these changes, different forms of communication have been emerging with the new technology. A common feature of these social media applications and cell phone applications is the “like” feature. This feature was first introduced in Facebook, a popular social media application, but it has also been used in group messaging applications, such as GroupMe and iMessage. Research into the “like” feature has taken place since its introduction in Facebook; however, I would like to look into how it plays a role in group messaging. I am specifically investigating what college students think liking means in group messaging and whether their perceived meaning behind liking is reflected in their actual usage of the like button.

Review of Literature

Language Features of the Digital Messaging Genre

Digital messaging encompasses a wide form of communication using technology such as phones and computers. Examples of this type of communication include instant messaging, text messaging, and group messaging. These forms of communication are all in the digital messaging genre, which includes certain functions and patterns of communication that have been thoroughly studied. For example, Haas, Takayoshi, Carr, Hudson, and Pollock (2011) analyzed transcripts of instant messages in order to pull out common language patterns in that form of communication.

They found fifteen language features, including emoticons and dropped letters. Nardi, Whittaker, and Bradner (2000), in a different study looking at instant messaging use in an office, looked at how messaging was used. Functions such as the “buddy list,” which was a list of contacts on the instant messaging application, had functional uses as part of communication when it was used to quickly check availability for communication. Another author, Spilioti (2012), looked at text messaging closings and sought to find patterns in the way people would end texting conversations. She found that there were often other factors dependent on the group involved in communication and their relationship status or future activities that determined when and how these parts of the messaging genre were used. Overall, these studies all looked at how digital messaging has evolved and how different functions within these new modes of communications affects communication between others. It is revealed that many aspects of messaging communication are fluid and may have use depending on individual context assigned within a chat, as demonstrated by Spiloti. However, certain aspects may have set meanings, such as the patterns of language use found in Haas et al.’s study. The like button, as a specific tool or language feature in group messaging, may either be fluid with specific context or have a more defined meaning, but there has not been much research to clarify which is true.

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Emoticons as a Form of Communication

Emoticons are small images used in messaging that portray certain faces or things. Traditionally, they have been created using typed out symbols, but more recently are pre-made images. Hsieh and Tseng (2017) looked specifically at how emoticons reflect a sense of playfulness, which contributes to relationship building, through instant messaging. Garrison, Remley, Thomas, and Wierszewski (2011) more broadly looked at how emoticons convey all emotions through instant messaging as a stand-alone form of communication. This idea of emoticons as a stand-alone form of communication was also expressed in Chang’s (2016) study looking at emoticon usage in peer feedback. In this specific context, emoticons had multiple usages in conveying messages, such as softening the blow of criticism or emphasizing positive feedback. The methods and specific analyses of these studies were all different, but they all looked at how emoticons, a picture used in communication, could convey something specific for an audience. Though emoticons are not quite the same thing as the like button or liking, they share similar aspects in the sense that they are a non-verbal aspect of instant messaging and communication in social media and group messaging.

Theory of Liking

A lot of research has been done on why people like posts on social media, though not many have focused on group messaging specifically. One idea that has been particularly useful in providing a basis for liking theory is Chin, Lu, and Wu’s (2015) theory that different interpersonal factors such as conformity and affiliation play a role in determining whether someone would like something or not. Theory of liking has also expanded into the modern age, affecting perceptions of legitimacy of video sources for assignments in Wuebben’s (2016) survey of students in his article. Additionally, a more recent analysis of why people like in group messaging social media applications was conducted by Gan (2017) for the popular Chinese application, WeChat. This study found that social factors, such as enjoyment and support, affected whether people would like in the

application, similar to the results of Chin et al.'s (2015) study of liking in the context of Facebook conducted a few years earlier.

Overall, there has been much research conducted on emoticons as a form of communication within instant messaging chats, and there has been much research on the concepts of "liking." However, most researchers have not looked at how liking as a form of communication plays a role in group chats such as those facilitated by Facebook messenger, GroupMe, and iMessage. One researcher, Gan (2017), has come close in a recent study of why people like other posts on the social media application, WeChat. However, this study looked more into the psychology of why people like another's post rather than the rhetorical implications of liking in this context. Analysis of liking in group messaging is important because it allows us to understand how online communication using the like button is not only intended but also perceived. Further understanding of how well the like button is communicated from sender to receiver can help the development of more sophisticated communication through liking in group messaging. Additionally, it can help other researchers seeking to understand group dynamics and behaviors in group chats, since liking messages has become a part of group messaging on mobile devices.

Methods

A survey was released via Facebook to the University of Central Florida students' Facebook pages for the classes of 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020 and further shared to other college students' pages to find out what the students believe liking in group messaging means and what messaging applications are used. I specifically used a ranking system, where "1" represented "Strongly Disagree" and "5" represented "Strongly Agree." A series of statements were presented, and the respondents selected a ranking for each of the statements. The number of respondents for each ranking for each statement was recorded, and a weighted average was calculated from the score chosen for each response. The results of this survey were compared to the analysis conducted on the transcripts of group messages to see if the perceptions of what the like button means match what liking is used for in group messages. Additionally, in order to determine which sub-populations the survey results were generalizable to, demographic data was collected.

After the survey was complete, analysis of group messaging chats was completed from transcripts that were submitted. In total, two transcripts were received: one GroupMe chat created by students in the same college class and one Facebook Messenger chat created by high school friends who sought to keep in touch in college. These transcripts were collected partially using the survey, which had a question at the end asking if the individual would like to send in transcripts of their group messages. I analyzed the transcripts for liking behavior, using the general trends from the survey as a guide. From the trends, I categorized groups of messages that had similar reasoning behind liking and deemed the category and specific reason behind liking. This helped show how liking is used in different contexts among different group messages and how liking is interpreted.

Results

What Does Liking Mean?

The initial survey contained 70 complete responses from college students from the University of Central Florida, the University of Maryland College Park, and various other colleges and universities along the East Coast of the United States, with 40 responses from students attending a college in Florida and 29 responses from students attending a college elsewhere; one

result was unclear. Generally, the survey was balanced between Florida college students and non-Florida college students along the East Coast, meaning this would adapt well to college students living in those regions. However, it is unclear whether differences in West Coast or Midwestern colleges would affect any results found from this initial survey. Additionally, the survey program used was unable to distinguish responses from Florida college student and non-Florida college student respondents, so it is unclear whether there are differences between these groups as well.

Fifty-nine respondents said they had Facebook Messenger and 55 respondents said they had GroupMe, though it is unclear how many respondents had both, one, or the other. These two group messaging applications were by far the most popular group messaging applications used, with the third most-used group messaging application being iMessage with 44 respondents replying they used it.

The survey specifically asked about level of agreement for each reason for liking listed in the survey, and the results for this question are shown in Table 1. A weighted average closer to 5 indicates the respondents generally agreed with the reason for liking, while a weighted average closer to 1 indicates the respondents generally disagreed with the reason for liking. A weighted

Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average
You like messages in group chats because you think the message is funny	1 (1.43%)	3 (4.29%)	10 (14.29%)	33 (47.14%)	23 (32.86%)	4.06
You like messages in group chats to support someone when they share something shocking or sad	4 (5.72%)	26 (37.14%)	14 (20%)	20 (28.57%)	6 (8.57%)	2.97
You like messages in group chats to show you approve or support a message	0 (0%)	5 (7.14%)	4 (5.71%)	35 (50%)	26 (37.14%)	4.17
You like messages in group chats because the message is ridiculous or upsetting to you	42 (60%)	24 (34.29%)	2 (2.86%)	1 (1.43%)	1 (1.43%)	1.50
You like messages in group chats to dog-ear messages	26 (37.14%)	14 (20%)	21 (30%)	7 (10%)	2 (2.86%)	2.21
You like messages in group chats because other people are liking that message	16 (22.86%)	17 (24.29%)	18 (25.71%)	18 (25.71%)	1 (1.43%)	2.59
You like messages in group chats in order to sarcastically respond to the message	20 (28.57%)	15 (21.43%)	8 (11.43%)	19 (27.14%)	8 (11.43%)	2.71
You like messages in group chats because that message has no likes and you feel pity for the person who posted it	27 (38.57%)	23 (32.86%)	10 (14.29%)	8 (11.43%)	2 (2.68%)	2.07

Table 1: Respondent Ratings of Reasons for Liking in Group Messaging

average around 3 indicates that the respondents generally did not agree or disagree with the reason for liking. In the table, the response count is shown without parentheses and the percentage of respondents that selected the ranking for each reason is shown in parentheses. From the initial survey, it appears the most agreed upon reasons for liking in group messaging are “the individual thinks the message is funny” and “the individual approves of this message,” as indicated by the rating average above 4 seen in Table 1. The other reasons for liking generally stayed in a range from 2 to 3, except for “liking because the message is ridiculous or upsetting,” which received a rating of 1.50. This may be because of some ambiguity and case-by-case scenarios, especially for “liking

because others are liking a message” which had around 25% of respondents selecting each ranking choice except for “Strongly Agree,” as seen below in Table 1.

Analysis of group messages was conducted to see if the perceived meaning behind liking shown in the survey was the same as the actual meaning derived from group messages. These messages were pulled from two chats, one chat communicated via GroupMe and the other chat communicated via Facebook Messenger. Since Facebook Messenger did not have an individual liking function for messages at the time the transcripts were collected, liking was analyzed by looking at the usage of the “thumbs-up emoji” or other symbols similar to a like symbol, such as an “ok” hand. Liking in GroupMe was analyzed by tracking whether a message received at least one “heart” and from whom the “hearts” were coming.

After analysis of the transcripts was completed, the reasons for liking were categorized. It appeared that “thinking the post was funny” and “approving the message” were the most common reasons. However, various other reasons were noted as well. All the categories observed are listed below.

Liking Means the Post Is Funny

The instances of liking when users found the post funny were the easiest to spot, especially when understanding the context of the conversation. A clear example of this form of liking comes from the Facebook Messenger chat, where at one point participants discussed school majors in a joking manner (see Figure 1). In Figure 1, Person 3 helps provide context that the group messages are meant as a joke. Person 4 then sends the “ok” sign, which is one of the symbols that can be interpreted as a “like” symbol. In this case, Person 4 “likes” the message because it is funny to the group, as established by Person 3.

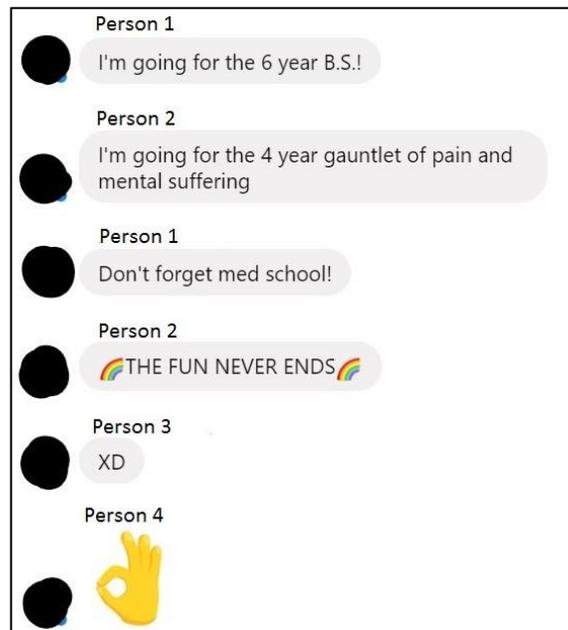


Figure 1

Another example of liking when the post was funny occurs in this discussion from the GroupMe chat used in this study involving a joke about Person 1. Person 1 seems to be someone who is late from the provided context of Person 2: “*if you show up” (see Figure 2). In this example, Person 3 and Person 2 both found Person 1’s reaction to the comment funny. This context for liking is confirmed by Person 3’s comment “LMAO,” which is a common acronym used when someone finds something funny.

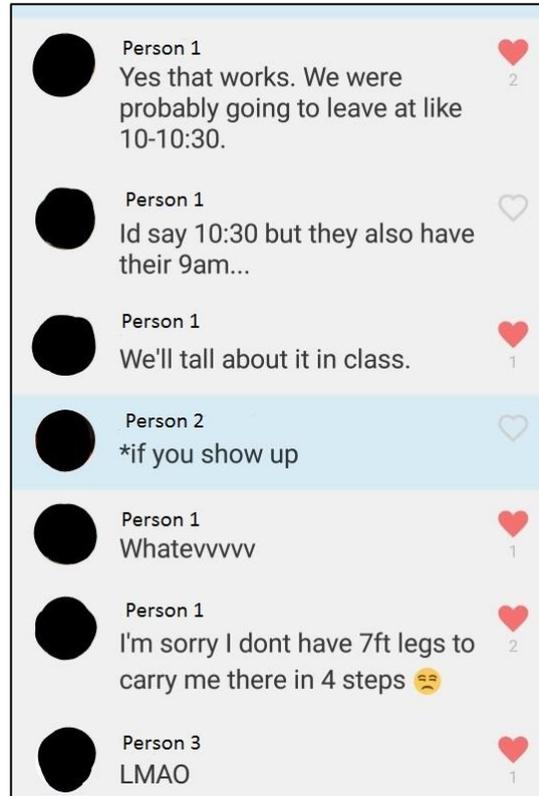


Figure 2

Liking Means the Person Approves of It

Approval generally takes two forms in the context of a group chat: people agree with the message of the post or they find the post enjoyable. The following examples demonstrate these two forms of liking because of approval.

The first example shows liking because of agreement with a message. In this example, Person 2 posts a video of a kid falling down the stairs on a bike, captioned "How's your semester going?" (see Figure 3). In response to the video, an exchange occurred where Person 1 stated that more crashing was needed to reflect how his semester was going (see Figure 4). The people who sent like emojis in response to the comment made by Person 1 did so because they agree that there is more crashing needed to demonstrate how poorly the semester was going.



Figure 3

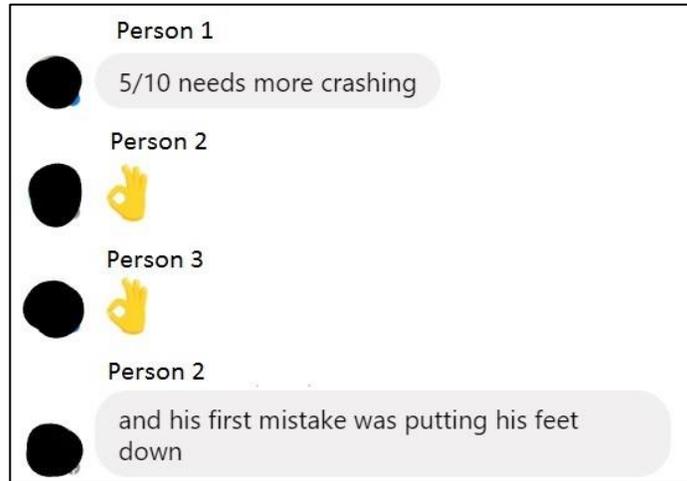


Figure 4

The next example shows liking because of enjoying the post. In this example, a meme (see Figure 5) is sent to the approval of another group member, as indicated by the comment “nice meme.” Rather than approving of the message behind the meme, Person 2 simply expressed that they found the meme enjoyable and followed their comment with a like emoji to further show their approval.



Figure 5

Liking Because It Is Part of a Joke

In some instances, the act of liking can be humorous and incorporated into a joke. Though this is less common, there are examples of this phenomenon in group messages.

In this example, the joke is that the other chat participants cannot “out ok” Person 4. The “ok” symbol for this chat is generally used to portray liking the messages in the chat. The joke started with a string of “ok” symbols from various people in the group chat in response to a certain



Figure 6



Figure 7

message (see Figure 6). Following this string of ok symbols, Person 4 responded by sending a larger version of the ok symbol with the comment “You can’t out ok me” (see Figure 7). In response, as a joke, Person 5 responded with a page full of “ok” symbols, as seen below in Figure 8. The important thing about this aspect of liking is that the like does not have a meaning besides the one assigned to it in the joke.

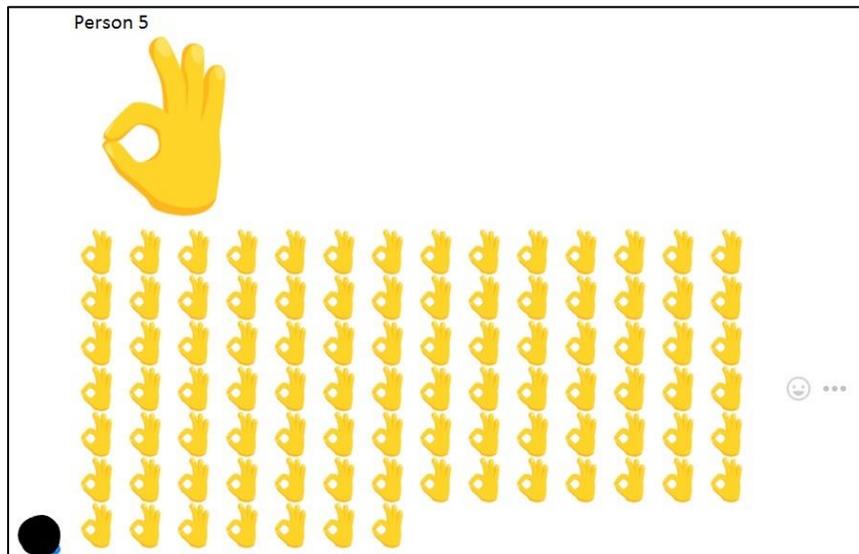


Figure 8

Liking to Confirm Something

Sometimes liking is used to confirm information, which is a more practical use for the liking button. One example of this is in this exchange confirming what certain undergraduate major abbreviations mean (see Figure 9). Person 5 tentatively responded to Person 4’s question, “What do these abbreviations mean...?” Person 2 replies to Person 5’s comment with a like symbol to affirm that Person 5’s answer was correct. From context, Person 2 knew what was being discussed, affirming that the like was to confirm the information provided by Person 5.

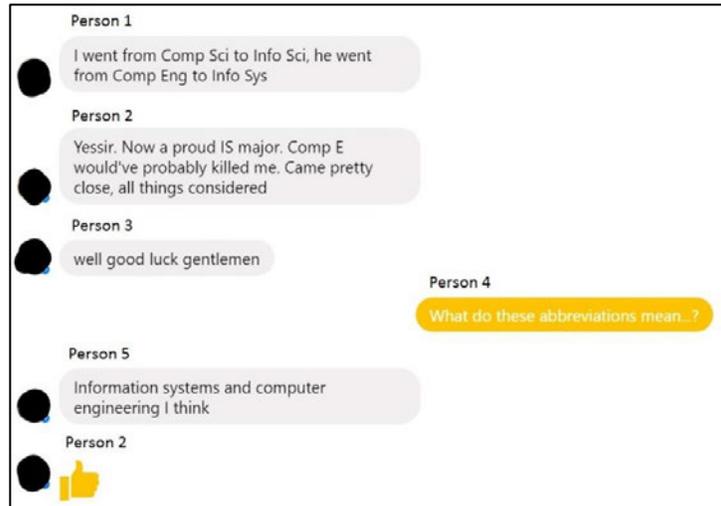


Figure 9

Another example of liking for confirmation is seen in Figure 10. In this example, Person 2 suggests a date and time for the group to meet. This was liked by three of the four other people in the chat to confirm the date and time as the time that they would be meeting. This is confirmed by Person 3’s comment “Good with me” and Person 1’s comment “Same here” (see Figure 10).

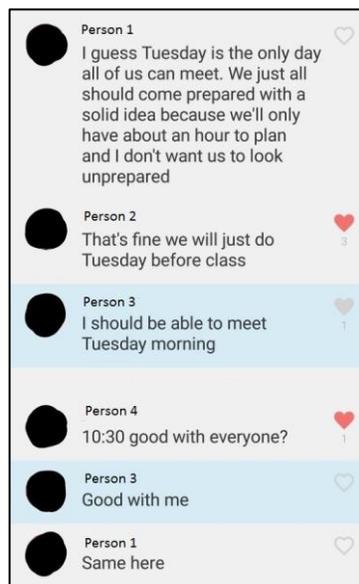


Figure 10

The final example is a special case within liking for confirmation. In this case, the confirmation is confirmation of reading the information, where the message was sent as a reminder of a specific task. In Figure 11, Person 1 sends a message as a “friendly reminder” that a certain task needs to be completed, which is then liked by two others in the chat to confirm that the reminder was received. This use of liking is unique to chats that plan activities or chats that were formed for classes.

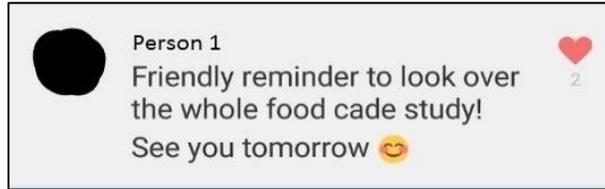


Figure 11

The Meaning Is Uncertain

Sometimes the meaning of the like is not as clear, even with context. For example, the following screenshots (see Figures 12 and 13) show two likes following a post with a picture and a comment. From this example, it is unclear whether the two people who like this post agree with the message of the post or if they find the post funny since there is little context to understand the meaning behind this.

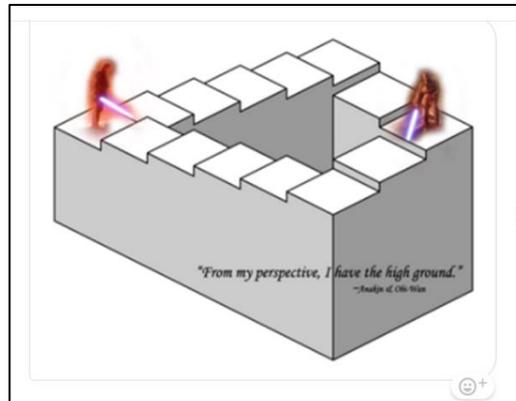


Figure 12

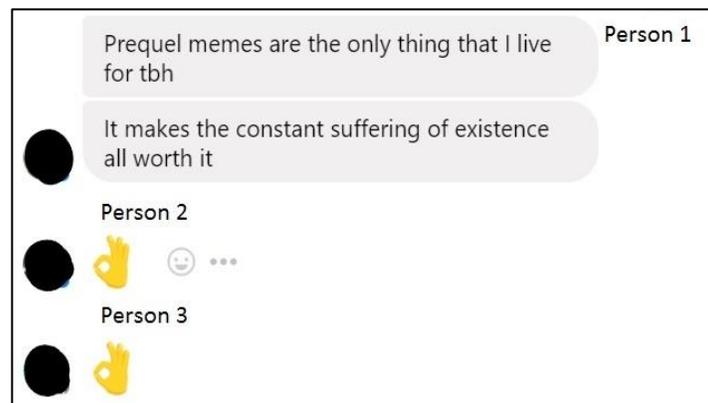


Figure 13

Discussion

The results of the survey appear to line up with most of the meanings behind liking in group messaging. The different reasons for liking as observed from the transcript analysis appear to align with the different categories of factors for liking observed in previous studies on liking theory for social media. For example, enjoyment and support, which were two reasons for liking observed in Gan's (2017) and Chin et al.'s (2015) studies on liking, appear to be common threads in the two main reasons for liking observed in my survey and seen in transcript analysis: "liking because the post is funny" and "liking because one approves of it."

However, unlike previous research on liking, a functional reason for liking that was dependent on the needs of the chat was observed as well, as seen in the transcript analysis where liking is used for confirmation of information or as part of a joke. This harkens back to Spilioti's (2012) research on closings used in messaging, where the particular use of a closing in a text message was dependent on the needs of the individuals in the message.

Additionally, the inconsistency behind the like button means that it does not necessarily have a universally accepted meaning, and depending on the group chat, the like button itself can have different purposes and meanings. This is similar to how Chang's (2016) study of emoji usage in peer review sessions could show a wide variety of purposes and meanings within the context of a peer review. Generally, it seems that the like button develops meaning from its context rather than having a predetermined meaning, which may be why some of the reasons for liking listed in the survey had many responses for "neither agree nor disagree."

Conclusion

Overall, though liking is a commonly used tool, it is hard to consistently tell what message that tool is conveying. Though there appears to be a general use to convey approval of a message or convey that the message is funny, as evident from the survey, there are many other uses for the like function that appear in the transcript analysis. This indicates that the general perception behind liking does not always reflect the reason behind liking. Generally, because meaning appears to be derived from the context of a given circumstance, the use for the like button widely varies in different situations.

Overall, though liking is a commonly used tool, it is hard to consistently tell what message that tool is conveying.

Despite the many possible meanings behind liking observed, the trend observed in the survey where liking is used to convey approval or convey the message is funny is still significant. This trend likely reflects the majority of liking behavior observed in group messaging across group chats due to the strong score in the survey. The other instances of liking use observed in this study could reflect rarer cases within all group chats, or the observed liking behavior could vary depending on the purpose of the group chat.

These purposes can vary depending on the reason behind the creation of the group chat. For example, a group chat made to plan a project will likely demonstrate different liking behaviors than a group chat for a friend group, and some of this behavior can be seen through the transcripts. The GroupMe chat was among students in the same class, which had certain liking behaviors such as "liking for confirmation" appear more often than in the Facebook Messenger chat that was among friends.

Investigations into the meanings behind liking behavior in group messaging applications can be useful to social media application developers, as a better understanding of the different messages others try to convey can lead to a more sophisticated application that uses tools better

designed for different tasks. This has already occurred with Facebook “reactions,” which are emojis reflecting different emotions, and will likely continue as more is understood about liking behavior in social media and in group applications. Additionally, technology impacts how individuals communicate in a group setting, which is also useful for researchers interested in studying group interactions to understand as technology continues to change.

Further research opportunities can come from this study, as there were some limitations and technology advancements that may better clarify liking behavior in group messaging. For example, though the survey data showed a trend that most college students use liking to convey the message is funny and that they approve the message, there are some instances in which the meaning behind the like button is slightly different or the meaning cannot be clearly determined. This can sometimes make communication challenging, and it could be an area that becomes more refined in applications like GroupMe where reactions to individual messages could be expanded beyond the “heart” function. As mentioned previously, it appears that some group messaging applications like iMessage and Facebook Messenger have realized the like button has a variety of uses, since many opted to have “reactions” to individual messages in their updates. It may be worthwhile through further studies to see if these updates clarify liking in group messaging more or cause the like button to converge closer to a specific use as the reactions are used more frequently.

Additionally, though the scope of this study was to investigate the meaning behind the like button, it would be interesting to see whether group dynamics affect its usage or if the usage of the like button affects group dynamics. It would also be worthwhile to investigate whether like button usage is more influential in a group message versus social media. These investigations could help clarify how the like button plays a social role in group messaging beyond the role of a writing tool, and it may be useful in understanding why the meaning behind the like button is so dependent on specific context.

There were some limitations of this study, as the population surveyed was college students and only two transcripts were collected for analysis. Further investigations could look at how liking behavior differs depending on age, as younger and older generations could potentially communicate in different ways through liking and could, as a result, show different liking behaviors in their group messages. Additionally, more transcripts would need to be analyzed in order to determine if the purpose of a group chat could influence the liking behavior observed in those group applications. This analysis of more samples could also help clarify if perceptions of liking reflected the majority of the liking behavior observed in group chat transcripts. This information also could be useful to those interested in studying group dynamics, as it would suggest that context, even in an online setting, could influence how people interact with others and liking behaviors.

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