
Writer's Statement for "Liking in Group Messaging: Perception versus Meaning"

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The major question being asked in the research was "How does writing do work in the world?" Reflecting on my initial interpretations of this question, I thought we would have to analyze a "formal document," like articles or a book. Once our class began discussing writing in the world with my professor, Matthew Bryan, I realized that the question referred to all written communication in the world: everything from text messages to research papers. Upon this realization, I was drawn to the idea of investigating group messaging, as it was a form of communication commonly used by me as I stayed in touch with my friends from Maryland and communicated with my new friends at UCF.

I initially looked at the genre of group messages before realizing that the liking function seemed to play its own role in the group messaging context that was not seen in Facebook or other social media sites. Liking seemed to be used to communicate many different messages in group messaging applications that were not necessarily consistent with social media sites. I found that it was vague enough to have many meanings, ranging from tracking a message to liking ironically to showing support. It reflected how humans could interact in complex ways by attributing meaning to such a simple symbol—something that was recognized by other social media sites with the inception of tools such as Facebook reactions in 2016. This information on liking in group messages would not only enable developers of group messaging applications to create a liking system that better reflects the different types of communication conveyed through liking, but it would also be useful to psychologists or others interested in understanding human interactions through different forms of communication as technology continues to change how we interact and communicate with one another.

I began my investigation by looking at current information on liking theory from social media sites such as Facebook, emoticon usage in communication, and language features of the social media genre that showed changing technology can change how we communicate. Based on the information found and on the methods used in many of these studies, I decided that I would need to collect transcripts or screenshots of group messages and I would need to collect survey data on perceptions of liking to guide my analysis.

The hardest part about the investigation was collecting the data, as it is difficult to motivate others to fill out a survey to completion and to submit transcripts of group messages. Many people failed to fill out the survey to completion, which meant I had to throw out their survey results. Additionally, I was only able to get two groups to submit consent forms and screenshots of their messages, which I thought would make the analysis portion more difficult. However, despite the perceived setbacks, I found that the information I received showed the multiple uses of the like button based on perceptions of liking and based on the group messaging transcripts submitted.

The research process in general took a long time, but this was expected. I went through many edits, both in the beginning when I was developing the idea for my project and towards the end as I was beginning to put everything together. I had to collect and understand the research ideas of others who had been in the field a long time, and I had to collect and understand my own data. The fact that liking had such a versatile and complex use did not make this difficult process of collection and understanding any easier. However, rather than being overwhelmed by the end goal, I could focus on the different tasks that worked toward the final paper—like stepping stones leading to the other side of a river. It was difficult to take that first step in sorting out my ideas of what I wanted to focus on, and even more difficult at times navigating the data I had collected. However, once I was on the other side, I found that reaching the other side was rewarding in and of itself—not because I was able to get published, which is always great, but because I was able to contribute to an ongoing conversation about how we interact with others through something as simple yet complex as the liking button.