

## Emoticons and Punctuation Marks in English Communication through a Mobile Instant Messaging (MIM) Application

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### Abstract

As a result of the rapid advancement of mobile technology, individuals can now communicate and exchange information from anywhere at any time. Users of MIM applications like *KakaoTalk*, *WhatsApp*, *Facebook Messenger*, and others can enrich their text messages by attaching pictures, videos, and other forms of media. Previous research has shown that the use of emoticons and punctuation marks enables people to convey their emotions and feelings in text-based communication. This study aimed to examine how Korean university students use emoticons and punctuation marks when communicating in English through the *KakaoTalk* MIM application, and to explore the role of these non-verbal elements in text-based MIM communication. The current study employed qualitative methods, including observing messages and conducting interviews to collect data from Korean university participants. The results showed that Korean participants made use of emoticons and punctuation marks provided by the *KakaoTalk* MIM application to support their English communication. Some positive functions of these features were demonstrated during conversations with their counterparts on the platform. The benefits of employing these features through a MIM application were discussed in terms of their ability to enhance the effectiveness of text-based English interactions.

## INTRODUCTION

As mobile technology advances, the use of Mobile Instant Messaging (MIM) applications for communication has increased in daily life. Mobile technology allows individuals to communicate and share information at any time and any location.

Communication via mobile applications or MIM applications on smartphones enables people to continue individual communication (Juhász & Bradford, 2016), support young learners' reading (Kwon & Kim, 2013), and develop the quality of relationships (Perry & Werner-Wilson, 2011). The users of MIM applications such as *KakaoTalk*, *WhatsApp*, *Facebook messenger*, *WeChat*, and others have more opportunities to deliver various information by attaching pictures, images or video clips. MIM applications provide users with a wide spectrum of visual features during communicating or exchanging information along with text messages (Sánchez-Moya & Cruz-Moya, 2015). They also make interpersonal communication

easy without meeting in person. Furthermore, people could express their emotions, ideas or thoughts by the use of emoticons or punctuation marks during interactions through MIM applications. The presence of these features enables people to transfer their current condition (Chairunnisa & A.S., 2017). People send emoticons or punctuation marks to display an emotion or sentiment so that the others could understand the sender's feeling condition in the plain text. The use of these features could support communication by meeting the preference and needs of individual users (Hwang, 2018). While previous research (Gibson et al., 2018; Ong'onda et al., 2010; Thompson & Filik, 2016) has focused on the use of emoticons and punctuation marks in interactions, little research has been conducted on Korean university students' use of emoticons and punctuation marks to communicate in English for their English learning using a MIM application. In addition, it is important to explore how these non-verbal features function in a text-based MIM communicative environment.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Use of Emoticons and Punctuation Marks in Technology-Enhanced Communication

Emoticons are used as non-verbal symbols which play a role as emotional substitutes for text messages (Walther & D'Addario, 2001). The lack of non-verbal cues in communication including facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures can have influence of the transmission of information (Archer & Akert, 1977). To replace these non-verbal expressions, people have devised different kinds of non-verbal cues such as capitalization for shouting, multiple exclamation marks for excitement and expressive symbols for facial features in technology-enhanced communication (Harris & Paradice, 2007; Riordan & Kreuz, 2010). These features of expression not only make up for the absence of non-verbal cues, but are also suitable for interaction on social media (Barbieri et al., 2016). Emoticons and punctuation marks, serving as non-verbal cues, help people communicate effectively by conveying the sender's emotions or feelings. In technology-assisted communication, emoticon and punctuation marks are regarded as the well-known visual representations and language features.

Emoticons are known as facial expressions or combination of keyboard characters that indicate sender's mood in a text message environments (Crystal, 2001). Dresner and Herring (2010) stated that emoticons are a blend of emotion and icons and refer to graphic symbols like the smiley face that are commonly used with text in computer-mediated communication (CMC). Some studies in the use of emoticons in text-based communication has been documented in the literature. It compensates for the lack of non-verbal cues and plays a role in conveying emotion (Gül, sen, 2016), boosting rapport in groups (Golato & Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006) and promoting interpersonal communication (Gibson et al., 2018). Furthermore, the emoticons using particular expression are utilized to build up a facial representation (Zhou et al., 2017). People in the text communication mode have difficulties in recognizing sender's correct emotion, attitude or intent of message through only texts (Lo, 2008). However, texts combined visual cues help users understand contexts along with a positive attitude (Mitchell, 1986). Other studies have found that people have used emoticons more frequently in a positive context rather than negative context (Lee & Wagner, 2002; Park, Kim, & Lee, 2014; Tossell et al., 2012). For instance, people included the emoticon :- ) in their texts to more clearly convey their happy intentions to the receiver of messages (Luor, Wu, Lu, & Tao, 2010). Park et al. (2014) reported that participants adopted positive emoticons features of chuckle (😄), smile (😊), beam (😁), wink (😉) and crushed (😍) to illustrate good communication moods. Derks, Bos, and von Grumbkow (2007) noted that emoticons have been more adopted in informal, playful or positive atmosphere than in formal or task-oriented environments. Furthermore, the use of emoticons has been found more frequently in equal relationship such as between friends or colleagues. Tossell et al (2012) pointed out that the participants sent more emoticon features in horizontal relationships rather than vertical ones. The use of emoticons allowed people to exchange their messages with more understanding and facilitate negotiation of meaning between more familiar people.

Emoticons were shown in MIM applications in forms of icon or image to present different expressions of happiness, sadness, scare and so on. In instant messaging (IM), the use of emoticons makes ambiguous contexts clear as substitute for nonverbal clues of face-to-face communication mode (Thompson & Filik, 2016) and provides more efficient communication (Dunlap et al., 2016) by indicating emotions (Wall et al., 2016). As nonverbal clues, emoticons can promote interaction (Aldunate & Gonzálezibáñez, 2017) and help people comprehend the sender's emotion, attitude or different level of attention (Lo, 2008).

Park et al. (2014) identified the main reasons for the use of emoticons in IM. It helped the receivers comprehend text messages in a more accurate and clear way and it allowed people to create a positive conversational atmosphere. In addition, it made users elaborate their feeling states more easily through the use of emoticons than only writing texts and promoted

interaction by avoiding misunderstanding in instant messaging communication mode (Aldunate & Gonzálezibáñez, 2017; Park et al., 2014). Park et al. (2014, p.162) emphasized that “senders want receivers to understand instant messaging well, so he/she sends emoticons to prevent miscommunications”.

Punctuation marks are efficiently used in technology-enhanced communication mode as another language feature. They clarify the meaning of text messages and also help people transfer their feeling states. For example, multiple punctuation marks in SMS communication context were used to emphasize tones like *!!!* or *????* and indicate sender’s strong feeling (Ong’onda, Matu & Oketch, 2010). The use of punctuation marks helped senders convey their emotions as an alternative method in text-based communication. The use of multiple punctuation marks enabled senders to intensify the meaning of their messages. It also compensated for the lack of nonverbal elements including facial features or body gestures showed in face-to-face interaction mode. Ong’onda et al. (2010) noted that various punctuation marks were utilized for “the structure and organization of SMS language as well as intonation and pauses” (p. 43) and writers could express their freedom from traditional English writing conventions through the unique use of punctuation marks. In their research, university students used variations in punctuation marks as a compensatory strategy to effectively transfer their emotions in text-based communication, rather than adhering to traditional punctuation rules. In addition, senders adopted a hyphen for a pause, while the omitted apostrophe in modal auxiliary verbs like *dont*, *cant*, or *wont* for saving time when they responded.

With the prevalence of punctuation marks, some studies in the impact of the use of punctuation marks on young learners’ literacy have been documented (Plester & Wood, 2009; Plester, Wood & Bell, 2008; Rosen, Chang, Erwin, Carrier & Cheever, 2010). According to Plester & Wood (2009), there was no negative effects on literacy for your students and they pointed out a positive aspect of texting on children’s literacy ability. On the other hand, Rosen et al.(2010) demonstrated a negative influence of young adults’ language use in formal writing, but a positive impact on their informal writing. To sum up, punctuation marks allowed people to transfer emotions and feelings in text-based communication as well as reinforced a sender’s tone by using multiple variations of punctuation. Furthermore, users could pause within messages and omit punctuations for a quick response during conversation. The non-standard use of punctuation marks enabled users to communicate in informal ways that were suitable for the relation-focused characteristics of text-based interaction.

## The Functions of Emoticons and Punctuation Marks in Texted-Based Communication

The studies in the literature emphasized the functions of emoticons in text-based communication (Bai, 2019; Darics, 2010; Golato & Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006; Maíz-Arévalo, 2015; Thompson & Filik, 2016). Using emoticons in text messages can enhance the richness of the information conveyed, allowing recipients to better understand the intended tone and effect of the message (Hsieh & Tseng, 2015). In chat communication, emoticons play a role in increasing the connection with others by showing emotions and current feelings (Maíz-Arévalo, 2015). According to Jibril and Abdullah (2013), incorporating images in interpersonal communication can be beneficial as the brain processes visual information faster than text. In text-based communication mode, the use of emoticons matching with the message can support the message meaning as one of the interactive strategies. This helps people easily comprehend the meaning of a message by providing additional context and reinforcement to the text. In terms of emotional function, Gülşen (2016) noted that emoticons could serve as a helpful tool in text-based communication by providing a way to convey emotions and non-verbal cues that may otherwise be missing in written text. The use of emoticons expanded lots of capacity to express emotions (Herring & Dainas, 2018; Jaeger et al., 2019) and different combinations of emoticons were utilized to enhance the meaning of emotional expression (López & Cap, 2017). In addition, different communication platforms including *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram* or *Gab* and others indicated several patterns of emoticon usage. People adopted several emoticons more frequently and positively on *Twitter* rather than on *Facebook* (Hall & Pennington, 2013). On the other hand, people in *Gab* platform showed the pattern of using positive emoticons when transferring their negative feelings to show ironical situations while users of *Twitter* adopted emoticons to indicate suspicious situations (Mahajan & Shaikh, 2019).

In terms of the role of punctuation marks in text messaging, some studies have observed that periods are often omitted at the end of sentences (Androutsopoulos & Busch, 2021; Gunraj et al., 2016; Houghton et al., 2018). Androutsopoulos and Busch (2021) and Busch (2017) found that in *WhatsApp* messages, there was often a low ratio of periods to messages at the end of sentences within a message. However, periods were found at the end of messages, indicating that their use served to mark the separation of speech bubbles.

Busch (2021) focused more on the syntactic, communicative, and scanning functions of punctuation marks. For example, the period has a metaphorical syntactic function because the certain period at the end of a statement could help to convey a sense of certainty and assertiveness. In addition, the use of multiple exclamation or question marks indicated the stronger emphasis or meaning in *WhatsApp* conversations. These punctuation marks could also help to transfer a suitable emotional

or social position in the given context (Georgakopoulou, 2016; Tannen, 2013). A single question mark was used to prevent confusion and clarify the intended meaning of a message. From a scanning perspective, the repeated use of ellipsis dots could be a way to convey politeness in digital communication. This could allow for the expression of polite disagreement (Vandergriff, 2013) through the use of intimation.

Considering the existing research in this area, this paper investigates the use of emoticons and punctuation marks by Korean university students to communicate in English using the *KakaoTalk* MIM application. It also explores the function of these non-verbal features in a text-based MIM communicative environment. The research questions are listed as follows:

- 1) How do Korean university students use the emoticons and punctuation marks during English communication via the *KakaoTalk* MIM application?
- 2) How do these non-verbal features function in English communications through the MIM application?

## METHOD

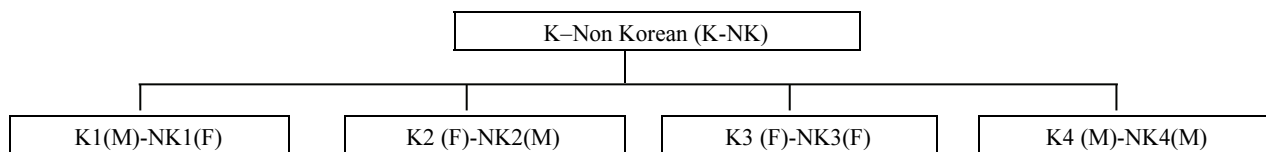
### Participants

As shown in Table 1, this study involved four Korean university students and four non-Korean university students. The Korean participants were two male and two female and they were from different faculties including Accounting, Economics, and Humanities. All Korean students have already completed two semesters of English classes. These classes emphasized four key areas of English learning: speaking, writing, reading, and listening. The Korean students, who were non-native speakers of English and in their second, third, or fourth year of study, were selected from a group attending a university writing center to improve their language abilities. Korean university students could visit this learning center for any assistance with English learning. Korean participants were chosen with a focus on equal gender representation and their willingness to engage in message observations and semi-structured interviews. The non-Korean participants were from Mongolia, Lithuania, Mexico, and Vietnam. As indicated in Figure 1, four Korean students were paired with non-Korean students who were studying at the same university as exchange students. The non-Korean participants were recruited as counterparts of Korean students to communicate in English. The non-Korean participants were chosen through a posting on the exchange student community website. Their motivation for participating was to interact with local Korean students and learn more about Korean culture and life in Korea.

**TABLE 1**  
*Participants' Demographic Information*

| Group                      | Pseudonym | Gender | First language |
|----------------------------|-----------|--------|----------------|
| Korean student ( K )       | K1        | Male   | Korean         |
|                            | K2        | Female | Korean         |
|                            | K3        | Female | Korean         |
|                            | K4        | Male   | Korean         |
| Non- Korean student ( NK ) | NK1       | Female | Mongolian      |
|                            | NK2       | Male   | Lithuanian     |
|                            | NK3       | Female | Spanish        |
|                            | NK4       | Male   | Vietnamese     |

All participants communicated using the *KakaoTalk* MIM application and were encouraged to exchange messages on some topics. To protect their identities, each student was assigned a pseudonym, with Korean participants being referred to as K1-K4 and non-Korean students as NK1-NK4.

**FIGURE 1**

*Grouping Participants in Pairs*

## Data Collection and Procedures

This study employed qualitative methods, including message observation and interviews, to gather data from Korean university participants. Qualitative data can be obtained from participants using a range of data collection methods, such as interviews and observations (Burns, 2000; Krueger, 1994; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991) and these methods were chosen because they allow for the collection of rich, detailed information from participants. A qualitative approach adopting message observations and semi-structured interviews was used to explore how Korean university students use emoticons and punctuation marks to communicate in English through a MIM application, and the role of these non-verbal features in a text-based MIM communication mode.

Prior to the phase of message observation, the Korean and non-Korean students were instructed to invite their conversation counterparts and to export the messages they exchanged to the email of the researcher. All participants were familiar with the *KakaoTalk* MIM application as they had experience using it. The students participating in the communicative activity possessed “mobile digital literacy”, defined by Ng (2016, p. 95) as the ability to use mobile technology effectively in all aspects of their lives. The paired participants were engaged in a four-week communication activity. They were given some topics including school life, friends, the best places to visit, and food in order to help initiate their conversations. They were encouraged to exchange messages with their paired partners using the MIM application. Their actual text-based communications in English were sent to the researcher for observation. The participants were involved in a total of four sessions during the interaction. A single session was designed to last for one week for English interaction. Korean participants and their non-Korean counterparts were able to communicate in English using the MIM application at any time and from anywhere. A sample of their English communication via the *KakaoTalk* MIM application is provided as shown in Excerpt 1 below.

### Excerpt 1

- 
- 1 11/23 17:07, K1 : Hello
  - 2 11/23 17:26, NK1: Hello! Nice to meet u
  - 3 11/23 17:26, NK1: Im NK1
  - 4 11/23 17:27, K1: where are u from??
  - 5 11/23 17:27, NK1: Im from Mongolia kk
  - 6 11/23 17:28, K1 : im K1
  - 7 11/23 17:28, K1: Are u in Mongolia??
  - 8 11/23 17:33, NK1: No im in korea
  - 9 11/23 17:33, NK1: kkk
  - 10 11/23 17:34, NK1: can I ask ur age?
  - 11 11/23 17:36, K1: Im 26years in korea'age
  - 12 11/23 17:36, K1: How about you?
  - 13 11/23 17:37, K1: I'm majoring in Accounting
- 

In addition to observing participants' messages, semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain the detailed information about the use of emoticons and punctuation marks by Korean participants and why they utilized these features when communicating in English via the *KakaoTalk* MIM application. In this research, there were two interviews. Korean participants were interviewed at the school office, with each interview lasting around 20 minutes. A set of pre-determined questions (refer to Appendix) guided these interviews.

## Data Analysis

The data from messages exchanged on the MIM platform were analyzed for the use of emoticons and punctuation marks in actual English communication. The data that the Korean participants sent to the researcher's email were printed out and read through to understand how Korean university participants use those non-verbal features during English communication via the *KakaoTalk* MIM application. The interviews were transcribed to prepare and organize the data for analysis. The transcriptions were thoroughly read multiple times to identify themes related to the functions of emoticons and punctuation marks during English interaction. A coding process was employed to identify relevant categories, which were used to classify the responses. This process entailed segmenting sentences into multiple themes and assigning them a label that aligns with the participants' statements (Creswell, 2009). The interview data was analyzed to interpret the significance of the themes and to identify the primary concepts within the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## RESULTS

### The Use of Emoticon and Its Function

The findings showed that the use of emoticons incorporated aspects of both spoken and written forms of communication. The emoticons were used to convey the sender's emotions and feelings in a more informal and verbal-like manner and these non-verbal cues helped to enhance understanding of the messages. The examples below present how the Korean participants used the emoticons and the different themes associated with how these features functioned in English interactions through the MIM application. The themes are identified as *showing feelings in a quick manner*, *transferring feelings vividly and clearly* and *showing familiarity between close relationships*. For example, the theme of *showing feelings in a quick manner* was evident in both the student interview and the excerpt from the message interaction.

#### *Showing Feelings in a Quick Manner*

The use of emoticons enabled the Korean participants to quickly convey their emotions and feelings, facilitating effective communication in the spontaneous environment of the *KakaoTalk* MIM application. The Korean student, K1 commented on the use of emoticons as follows:

It is effective to use emoticons because I can express my emotions or feelings directly to my language partner without typing many words. It is an easier way to show feelings to others in text-based communication. (K1\_Interview)

As shown in excerpt 2 below, K1 described his feelings by adopting an animated emoticon displayed as (이모티콘) in turn 583. The exchanged animated emoticon was marked as 이모티콘 because participants' messages were sent to the researcher's email as a text type. In the text messages sent by participants to my email account, animated emoticons were represented as “이모티콘” in Korean. This is due to the messages being transmitted as text, which caused the original animated emoticons to be displayed in this manner. The inclusion of emoticon in his message enhanced its meaning by conveying additional emotional context.

#### **Excerpt 2**

580 12/18 17:13, NK1: by the way this week's topic is friends

581 12/18 17:13, NK1: kkkk

582 12/18 17:13, NK1: do u have girlfriend???

583 12/18 17:15, K1: Last month seperated (이모티콘)

#### *Transferring Feelings Vividly and Clearly*

The following example indicated that incorporating emoticons allowed the student to add feelings to texts and elaborate on thoughts and feeling states in a vivid and clear way as mentioned by K3:

I didn't usually use emoticons when communicating in Korean language but I used a lot of emoticons in this English conversation with my partner who is a non- Korean. I think I could load up my emotions into messages vividly by the use of emoticons. It sometimes helped me express my thoughts in a clear way. (K3\_Interview)

As demonstrated in excerpt 3 below, K3 expressed her feeling of sadness about not having special plans for Christmas in turns 48 by adding graphical emoticon. In addition, K3 showed her feeling of disappointment in turn 52 through the inclusion of emoticon. Emoticons could help the sender clarify his/ her feelings and emotional states in a conversation.

### Excerpt 3

- 
- 47 12/24 18:04, NK3: What are your plans for tomorrow?  
 48 12/24 21:15, K3: Hmm.. I don't have any plan tomorrow (눈물)  
 49 12/24 21:16, K3: I will meet friends today and I think I will spend time with family tomorrow  
 50 12/24 21:34, NK3: Hehehe christmas is for couples here : (  
 51 12/24 21:34, NK3: So sad. It's a fimiky holiday in mexico  
 52 12/24 21:43, K3: Yeah Korea christmas is for couple (눈물)  
 53 12/24 21:43, K3: oh I really want to go Mexico during christmas hahaha
- 

### Showing Familiarity between Close Relationships

The following quotes showed that the Korean participants utilized emoticons on the *KakaoTalk* platform to convey close friendships and familiar relationships. These quotes represented that Korean participants used emoticons to reveal emotions and feelings in relationships of equal status, such as between friends or acquaintances.

I usually use emoticons with friends or familiar people and I choose different ways to express my feelings according to the levels of familiarity to people like between close friends or between general relationships. (K4\_Interview)

I generally use emoticons when communicating with close friends to express my emotions and state of mind. However, I am cautious about using them with people of the opposite gender, particularly females. I tend to use them more frequently when communicating in Korean with close friends than with people I am not familiar with. (K1\_Interview)

As indicated in examples above, the findings demonstrated that the use of emoticons played a role to express Korean participants' emotions and feelings quickly and spontaneously, without need for text description. Furthermore, emoticons were adopted to clearly and vividly transfer participants' emotional states or to show familiarity between close people or language counterparts.

### The Use of Punctuation Mark and Its Function

The Korean participants also adopted punctuation marks in the *KakaoTalk* MIM application to describe their feelings and thoughts. The following examples indicated how punctuation marks were used and the themes related to how they functioned when the Korean participants exchanged messages. The themes identified for using punctuation marks were to reinforce emotions and feelings, emphasize messages, and express closeness in informal conversations.

### Reinforcing Emotions and Feeling States

In the given example below, the Korean student utilized punctuation marks to reinforce emotions and feeling states in *KakaoTalk* communication. The use of multiple question or exclamation marks appeared to express different strength/level/degree of emotions and feeling states. For instance, excessive exclamation marks indicated more intensive feelings, as demonstrated by K1.

I adopted a number of punctuation marks when indicating my stronger feeling. I think I could display my different emotion or feelings by using the different numbers of punctuation mark. It helped me show my intense emotions or feelings. (K1\_Interview)

In the excerpts 4 and 5 below, K1 employed multiple punctuation marks in the *KakaoTalk* messages to strengthen his feelings. In turn 50 of excerpt 4, he conveyed a strong sense of awe or curiosity by using three question marks with *Really??? wow*. In turn 58, K1 showed a high degree of realizing what he didn't know before by using three exclamation marks with *Ahh!!!*. Additionally, in excerpt 5, K1 adopted punctuation marks in a similar way to reinforce his feelings. In turn 89, he expressed a strong sense of envy by using multiple exclamation marks with *Have a rest!!!*. K1 used varying numbers of exclamation or question marks to convey different levels of emotional intensity.

#### Excerpt 4

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47 12/11 15:04, K1: Mogolia.....i want yo know  
 48 12/11 15:04, NK1: (이모티콘) oh my home town its so beautiful  
 49 12/11 15:04, NK1: blue sky  
 50 12/11 15:04, K1: Really??? wow  
 51 12/11 15:04, NK1: big ground  
 52 12/11 15:05, NK1: not many people  
 53 12/11 15:05, K1: Ahh  
 54 12/11 15:05, NK1: so peaceful  
 55 12/11 15:05, K1: What is the capital  
 56 12/11 15:05, K1: Name of capital  
 57 12/11 15:06, NK1: mongolian capital is Ulaanbaatar  
 58 12/11 15:06, K1: Ahh!!!  
 59 12/11 15:06, NK1: its almost same as here  
 60 12/11 15:06, NK1: cars buildings banks shopping centers

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#### Excerpt 5

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77 12/11 15:10, K1: what is ur plan form now zz  
 78 12/11 15:12, NK1: ummm mbe hanging out with friends  
 79 12/11 15:12, NK1: kkk  
 80 12/11 15:12, K1: (이모티콘) I envy you.  
 81 12/11 15:12, K1: I want to finish final exam  
 82 12/11 15:12, NK1: kkkkkk when do u finish ur exams?  
 83 12/11 15:12, K1: Next tuesday  
 84 12/11 15:13, NK1: oh ㅠ sad  
 85 12/11 15:14, NK1: u have to study  
 86 12/11 15:14, K1: (이모티콘)  
 87 12/11 15:14, NK1: ㅠ  
 88 12/11 15:14, K1: Yeah zzz you can rest  
 89 12/11 15:15, K1: Have a rest !!!!  
 90 12/11 15:15, NK1: Yeah good luck with ur exams!

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### Emphasizing Messages

The example from the interview demonstrated how punctuation marks were used to emphasize the participants' words or messages. The use of punctuation marks allowed the receiver of messages to focus on what the sender was saying. By adopting varying numbers of punctuation marks, the Korean student was able to highlight the messages in an effective manner as illustrated by K2:

I use one exclamation mark for emphasizing my saying and multiple exclamation marks for my surprise. (K2\_Interview)

As shown in the excerpts below, K2 used several exclamation marks to convey surprise by saying *Wow !!!* in turn 16 of excerpt 6. K2 also used exclamation mark to emphasize the messages in turns 30 and 32 of excerpt 7.

#### Excerpt 6

- 
- 13 11/22 23:40, K2: Where do you live? Are you a student?  
 14 11/22 23:43, NK2: I live on the campus, at the dormitory. Yes, I am an exchange student  
 15 11/22 23:43, NK2: What about you?  
 16 11/22 23:46, K2: Wow !!!  
 17 11/22 23:47, K2: Which dormitory??
- 

#### Excerpt 7

- 
- 27 11/23 00:03, K2: Where are you from?  
 28 11/23 00:04, NK2: Lithuania.  
 29 11/23 00:04, NK2: Are you from Daegu?  
 30 11/23 00:07, K2: No im from Busan !  
 31 11/23 00:08, NK2: Yay, the city of many mountains  
 32 11/23 00:10, K2: Right! And famous for beach !
- 

### Expressing Familiarity in Informal Talk

According to K3's quote, the Korean student used punctuation marks to show a sense of familiarity in informal conversations through the MIM application. The punctuation marks were employed to indicate a feeling of comfort and ease with a language partner during informal interactions as supported by K3:

I think that it seems to be a formal conversation if I use punctuation mark once each sentence as a conventional method but use of multiple punctuations is likely to express familiarity to counterpart and it is like more informal talk. (K3\_Interview)

As demonstrated in excerpt 8, K3 used multiple punctuation marks consecutively to express closeness with NK3. K3 conveyed a sense of amazement by using multiple exclamation and question marks with *oh really* in a non-standard way. K3 employed punctuation marks in an unconventional way in her informal communication on the *KakaoTalk* platform, combining a questioning tone to confirm her understanding with an expression of amazement.

#### Excerpt 8

- 
- 42 11/23 17:05, NK3: I have three dogs  
 43 11/23 17:05, NK3: Lovr them and miss them  
 44 11/23 17:48, K3: Oh really !?!?!?! Three dogs ?!  
 45 11/23 17:49, NK3: Yes a yorkie, italian greyhound abd a whippet  
 46 11/23 18:19, K3: Aha! They should be cute~
- 

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how Korean university students use emoticons and punctuation marks when communicating in English through the *KakaoTalk* MIM application and to explore the role of these non-verbal elements in text-based MIM interactions. The findings indicated that the Korean participants utilized emoticons and punctuation marks facilitated by the *KakaoTalk* application to support their communications. The use of these features provided some advantages in English interaction through a MIM application by enhancing the effectiveness of text-based interactions. The emoticons and punctuation marks enabled participants to transfer emotions or feelings in the text-based communication mode. The features as visual aids allowed participants to communicate in an effective and clear manner. As noted by the New London Group (1996), emoticons and punctuation marks are the digital equivalent of gestures used to convey emotions

and tone. In particular, emoticons were used as the replacement of facial expressions in the text-based communication (Derks et al., 2007; Park et al., 2014; Tossell et al., 2012). In text-based communication, emoticons could be used to convey non-verbal information such as facial expressions, gestures, and other visual cues that are present in face-to-face interactions. The results demonstrated that the Korean participants used emoticons to show their emotions and feeling states quickly in the *KakaoTalk* MIM application. The installed pictorial or graphical emoticons such as 😊, 😄, 😌, and 😊 are more frequently adopted rather than the text-typed emoticons including :) or :P. The students adopted 😊 or 😌 to express feelings of stress and 😊 or 😄 to indicate a positive emotional state.

The Korean participants noted that using emoticons was a direct and spontaneous way to transfer their emotions and feelings in a text-based MIM communication setting. They commented that the use of emoticons allowed them to show their emotions without having to write lengthy texts and helped to prevent misunderstandings by enhancing comprehension of negotiated communication. This finding is consistent with that of Park, Kim, and Lee (2014) who demonstrated that using emoticons in instant messaging helped recipients understand messages and avoid misunderstandings in text-based communication. However, as noted by Park et al. (2014), the use of emoticons can also be irritating or make conversations seem less serious. In this study, the Korean student, K1 noted that he used emoticons when communicating with close friends to express his emotions and feelings. However, he was careful when using them with people of the opposite gender, especially females. This finding implies that K1 is context-aware and consciously uses emoticons more often with close friends in informal conversations than with people he is not familiar with. Thus, this result indicates that the use of emoticons may be more appropriate in informal settings or with people the user is familiar with, rather than in formal communication. Using emoticons helped the participants convey their emotions in a clear and vivid manner, promoting a sense of closeness and intimacy between them. The mutual use of emoticons by language partners is likely to be considered comfortable and acceptable within the culture of young people.

The findings indicated that the Korean participants also incorporated punctuation marks to express the different degrees of feeling states in text-based interactions. For example, the use of excessive exclamation and question marks such as *Ahh!!!* and *Really???* indicated a different degree of profound enlightenment and different level of curiosity. As demonstrated by Busch (2021), using more signs can enhance the strength of the meaning conveyed, and these punctuation marks serve as a way to intensify emotional and affective experiences. In addition, the Korean participants pointed out that they could convey their emotions in more depth by using multiple punctuation marks. Based on the findings, it seems that the Korean participants had their own unique ways of using punctuation, such as using various punctuation marks or varying the number of marks to effectively convey their emotions and feelings. Despite the text-based nature of the communication, the Korean participants were able to engage in more expressive interactions by directly conveying their emotions through the use of punctuation marks.

Emoticons and punctuation marks were used as non-verbal cues to express the sender's emotions and feelings, and to keep the conversation going in an authentic way in text-based communication. The study found that the Korean participants had a positive attitude towards the use of emoticons and punctuation marks in their *KakaoTalk* MIM application. They reported some positive functions of these features during conversations with their counterparts on the platform. These results suggest that incorporating emoticons and punctuation marks into English conversations via messaging applications might enhance effective communication for Korean university students and it could assist students' English language learning as well. Therefore, teachers can provide direction on the appropriate and diverse use of emoticons and punctuation marks as methods or strategies of communication to improve students' experiences with the English language learning. In contrast to formal writing in an educational setting, understanding the use of emoticons and punctuation marks is necessary to assist with authentic English communication through MIM applications in the context of electronic text-based communication.

When Korean university students interact in English in text-based communication mode, the appropriate use of emoticons and punctuation could contribute to effective English communication. This study has some constraints that could be addressed in future research. These limitations also present opportunities for further exploration and investigation in subsequent studies. The examples in this study demonstrated the use of emoticons and punctuation marks by Korean participants, as well as the different themes related to how these elements functioned in English interactions via the MIM application within four pairs. The sample size was insufficient for generalizing the use of those non-verbal features and themes of their functions in English communication through the MIM application. Future research could involve a larger number of pairs, exceeding four pairs. This would provide a broad understanding of the usage of emoticons and punctuation marks through a MIM application, and broaden the applicability of the results. Next, this study focused on English interactions between pairs, examining the use and function of non-verbal features. However, as communications may occur in larger groups, future research could investigate text-based interactions in different group sizes (e.g., small groups of 3-4 students or large groups of more than 5 students) to see if group size affects communication dynamics and the use of non-verbal features in MIM applications.

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## APPENDIX

### Interview Questions

1. Could you share some information about yourself?
2. How is your English interaction with your language partner progressing?
3. Did you utilize emoticons and/or punctuation marks when communicating through the KakaoTalk MIM application?
4. Why did you use those features when interacting via the MIM application?
5. Do you think the use of emoticons and/or punctuation marks is effective in facilitating English interactions through the MIM application? Why or why not?