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A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF GENDER DIFFERENCES IN LEXICAL FEATURES OF SMS TEXT MESSAGING: A STUDY OF PAKISTANI UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract
This study investigates gender-based differences in the use of lexical features in SMS text messaging among Pakistani university students. With the rapid expansion of mobile-mediated communication, SMS has become a significant site for examining informal and innovative language practices influenced by social factors such as gender. Adopting a qualitative and descriptive research design, the study draws data from a purposive sample of 100 university students (50 male and 50 female), aged 21–24, enrolled at the University of the Punjab, Government College University, and the University of Education. A total of 300 SMS messages were collected over three days and analyzed using content analysis within the framework of Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA). The study focuses on four key lexical features: initialisms, clippings, contractions, and letter–number homophones. The findings reveal clear gendered patterns in SMS communication. Male participants showed a higher frequency of initialisms, clippings, and contractions, reflecting a preference for brevity and efficiency. In contrast, female participants used letter–number homophones more frequently, indicating a more expressive and creative texting style. The study concludes that gender plays a significant role in shaping lexical choices in SMS discourse within the Pakistani sociocultural context.

Keywords: *Gender, SMS text messaging, lexical features, computer-mediated communication.*

Introduction

Language, in its various forms, plays a central role in shaping and expressing the values, ideas, and identities of individuals. In contemporary society, language use has been significantly influenced by the rise of digital communication technologies, especially through platforms like Short Message Service (SMS). These platforms offer a more informal, truncated, and often creative means of communication. However, one of the fascinating yet understudied aspects of SMS communication is the role of gender in shaping linguistic features. Gender differences in language usage have long been a topic of study in sociolinguistics (Herring, 1994; Coates, 1993), and these differences are also observable in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) like SMS text messaging.

This research aims to explore gender-based variations in the use of lexical features in text messages among Pakistani university students. With the rise of mobile communication, SMS has

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emerged as a crucial part of everyday life, making it a significant avenue for studying how gendered communication practices manifest in digital discourse. This study utilizes Herring's (2003) framework of Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) to explore how males and females use different lexical features, including initialisms, clippings, contractions, and homophones, in their SMS communication.

Research Objectives

1. To identify and compare gender-based differences in the use of selected lexical features (initialisms, clippings, contractions, and letter–number homophones) in SMS text messaging among Pakistani university students.
2. To examine the influence of gender on lexical choices in SMS communication among Pakistani university students using the framework of Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA).

Research Questions

1. What gender-based differences exist in the use of initialisms, clippings, contractions, and letter–number homophones in SMS text messaging among Pakistani university students?
2. How does gender influence lexical variation in SMS communication among Pakistani university students?

Literature Review

Gender differences in language use have been a significant area of research for several decades. Scholars like Lakoff (1975), Tannen (1990), and Coates (1993) have examined how males and females utilize language differently, primarily focusing on spoken communication. These differences often manifest in terms of vocabulary, syntax, and conversational style. Males are frequently characterized as using more direct, competitive, and assertive forms of language, while females tend to use more cooperative, polite, and supportive linguistic styles (Tannen, 1990; Coates, 1993). With the advent of CMC, researchers like Herring (2001) and Crystal (2008) extended this investigation into the realm of digital communication, noting that gender differences are equally prominent in online discourse. Herring (2003) demonstrated that male and female communicators often exhibit distinct styles when engaging in asynchronous online communication. Males tend to use more direct, forceful language, while females employ a more mitigated and relationship-oriented discourse.

A growing body of research on SMS and CMC specifically highlights certain lexical features, such as contractions, clippings, and initialisms, that are more frequently used in digital communication. According to Thurlow and Poff (2011), these features help to create brevity and efficiency in SMS, but they also reflect individual and cultural preferences. Research has also shown that females tend to use more emoticons and detail-oriented language in their texts (Herring & Zelenkauskaite, 2008). In contrast, males are often seen favoring brevity and quick, utilitarian communication.

In Pakistan, research on SMS communication has revealed that both genders use different levels of linguistic sophistication in their texting practices. Rafi (2008) found that Pakistani females tend to use longer and more lexically dense SMS messages than their male counterparts. Conversely, males were found to use more abbreviations and homophones, indicating a greater focus on efficiency in communication. Such studies have confirmed the presence of gendered patterns in SMS communication, but the specifics of these differences have yet to be fully explored, particularly within the Pakistani context.

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Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative and descriptive approach to analyze gender differences in SMS text messaging among university students in Pakistan. The study uses purposive sampling to select participants who are university students aged 21 to 24, with at least three years of experience using SMS. The participants were drawn from three public sector universities in Pakistan: University of the Punjab, Government College University (GCU), and the University of Education. A total of 100 participants were selected for the study, equally divided between male and female students.

The students were asked to forward three text messages each over a three-day period, resulting in a corpus of 300 messages, which were analyzed for lexical features. Content analysis was employed to identify and categorize the lexical features present in the text messages. The features under examination included contractions, initialisms, clippings, and letter–number homophones. Descriptive statistics were used to quantify the frequency and percentage of each feature used by male and female participants. The analysis was conducted separately for the two groups, allowing for a comparison of their linguistic choices.

Herring's (2004) framework of Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) was used to guide the analysis of gendered discourse in SMS. CMDA provides a comprehensive methodology for analyzing online communication, focusing on aspects such as sampling techniques, data classification, and interpretation of results.

Analysis and Findings

The data reveals compelling gendered patterns in the linguistic features used by Pakistani university students in their SMS communication. The key linguistic features examined initialisms, clippings, contractions, and letter-number homophones, each show distinct preferences between male and female texters, reflecting broader trends in how gender shapes digital discourse.

Linguistic Features	Males (n=150)	Females (n=150)	Total
Initialism (Alphabetism, Acronyms)	20 (57%)	15 (43%)	35
Clipping	68 (52%)	64 (48%)	132
Contraction	212 (59%)	150 (41%)	362
Letter & Number Homophones	67 (29%)	167 (71%)	234

Initialism

One of the most striking findings is the pronounced gender divide in the use of initialisms, which include both alphabetisms (e.g., "Aoa" for Assalam o Alaikum) and acronyms (e.g., "LOL" for Laughing Out Loud). Males in this study used more initialisms overall (57% of the total initialisms) than females (43%). This aligns with the idea that male texters favor shorthand and efficiency, seeking to condense information into the smallest possible space, making it quicker to type and easier to process. Males, especially in the Pakistani context, often adapt initialisms not just from English, but also from Urdu, further showing the bilingual nature of SMS language. Common examples from the data include "Aoa" and "IA" (for Insha'Allah). These adaptations

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highlight how digital discourse not only truncates language for efficiency but also merges cultural and linguistic elements seamlessly.

In contrast, females in the study used initialisms less frequently but still relied on them. This could reflect a slightly more cautious approach to texting, where females may be more deliberate in their communication, aiming for clarity while still embracing the convenience of abbreviations.

Clipping

Clipping, another hallmark of SMS language, was notably more frequent in male messages, with 52% of males utilizing this feature compared to 48% of females. This demonstrates that males, much like their use of initialisms, prioritize brevity and speed in their text communication. Clipped words such as “comin” (coming), “goin” (going), and “hav” (have) were commonly used, showcasing how SMS users, particularly males, feel the need to optimize their time while texting.

Interestingly, the clippings observed in female messages were equally varied, yet they were somewhat less frequent. This may point to a difference in texting style: while both genders understand the constraints of SMS (e.g., character limits), females may be more inclined to use a fuller form of language, emphasizing clarity over brevity. This finding resonates with the notion that while both males and females are constrained by SMS’s limitations, they deploy linguistic shortcuts differently, possibly driven by gendered expectations of communication style.

Contraction

Contractions were by far the most dominant linguistic feature in male SMS communication, with males using contractions in 59% of their messages, compared to 41% in females' messages. Males commonly employ contractions like “I’ll” (I will), “don’t” (do not), and “it’s” (it is), which are classic indicators of casual, fast-paced communication. This tendency aligns with the broader male preference for efficiency and minimalism in text communication, reflecting the same motivations behind their use of initialisms and clippings.

In contrast, females' messages showed a more reserved approach to contractions. This could reflect a cultural and linguistic tendency for females to avoid overly casual forms of communication, especially in a context like texting, where formality can be deliberately maintained even in informal settings. It’s as if the contraction serves as a sign of effortlessness that males embrace, while females balance brevity with clarity, perhaps due to an inclination toward relational communication.

Letter and Number Homophones

The most unexpected finding emerged in the use of letter and number homophones, where females were far more frequent users (71%) compared to males (29%). These homophones, such as “u” for “you,” “4” for “for,” and “b4” for “before,” not only reflect the desire for brevity but also introduce an element of creativity and personal flair in digital communication. Females were notably more likely to mix letters and numbers to form homophones like “2nite” (tonight) and “w8” (wait), creating a visually engaging and playful style of texting.

This trend suggests that females may use SMS not just for communication but as a platform for personal expression, imbuing their messages with creativity and an extra layer of identity. The use of homophones also conveys a sense of casualness, yet it carries a more artistic and stylized approach to shorthand. Males, on the other hand, used homophones less frequently, possibly favoring a more utilitarian approach to texting that prioritizes efficiency over the playful elements seen in female messages.

Conclusion

This study confirms that gender differences in language use extend to SMS text messaging among Pakistani university students. Males tend to favor brevity and efficiency, as evidenced by their frequent use of initialisms, clippings, and contractions. In contrast, females use more letter and number homophones, highlighting their creative and expressive approach to digital communication. These findings contribute to our understanding of genderlects in computer-mediated communication and underscore the significant role of gender in shaping linguistic practices in the digital age.

Future research could explore how these gendered linguistic practices evolve, particularly with the increasing use of multimedia messaging platforms. Additionally, examining the intersection of gender with other sociolinguistic variables, such as age and socio-economic status, could provide deeper insights into the complexities of digital discourse.

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