

# Bonding Gossip as an Identity Negotiation Life Phase: A Study of Multimodal Texting via Smartphone Among Taiwanese College Freshmen

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## Abstract

Drawn on ethnographic interviews with 17 informants as well as seven focus group interviews, this study examines how college freshmen text on social media via smartphones to formulate collegiate bonding. Gossip is common between two individuals to avoid collapsed context, so both parties can ascertain the meaning derived from such situated interaction; it is less frequently among multiple small group users. Three linguistic genres of gossip identified include (1) sarcastic gossip—negative but not malicious—on fellows, (2) gossip against authorities, and (3) celebrity gossip. However, gossiping among freshmen is a life-phase phenomenon, usually lasting 2 or 3 months until a solid social network with stronger ties in an offline context has been secured. Over time, the freshmen have gradually reduced their amount of time investing in such communicative capital. As a result of multimodal communicative tools, social media has afforded wider and more multimodal dissemination of information which the freshmen might otherwise have not been able to access. Gossiping is popular for it provides sources of conversational comfort and sartorial security, creating a safer net so that the freshmen could playfully navigate through the precarious life phase.

## Keywords

texting, gossip, identity negotiation, collapsed context, situated interaction

## Introduction

Texting on social media has gained huge popularity across the world as the preferred medium for mobile communication, especially among young people, thanks to the prevalence of smartphones (Holloway & Valentine, 2001, 2003; Ling, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2010; Ishii & Ogasahara 2007; Ito, 2003; Ito & Okabe, 2005). Texting, the ability to send short multimedia messages to another person, is perhaps one of the most popular features found in smartphones in Taiwan for young people. A 98% of 18- to 34-year-old Taiwanese reported that they have been sending or receiving text messages using their phones since 2013, and the figure continues to grow (F.I.N.D., 2014). The prevalence is corroborated by the researcher's primary investigation on 188 students in media literacy class, discovering that all of the freshmen had owned a smartphone, with 155 contacts on their LINE (a popular multimedia messaging platform of social media) on average. The use of social media among these surveyed students, mostly via smartphones, started

from 2009. The technological affordances of social media provide young users not skilled in typing Mandarin Chinese a wider range of multimodal communicative venues beyond written texts, including stickers (static or animating), photographs, videos, and hyperlinks. Meanwhile, with the rise of new typing system available to smartphone users, texting has become friendlier for the elder who had relatively seldom used previous phonetic typing system, all of which had led to the rapid diffusion of texting on social media via smartphones in Taiwan. The use of various communicative venues on social media is remarkable in Taiwan that the precedent form of mediated communication existed as Instant Message (IM) on PC until less than 10 years since 2007, and social

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networking function such as LINE on smartphones had never been this common until the popularity of smartphone soared.

In the decade of smartphone, academic inquiries toward texting have examined why young users are so caught up with these social media as well as these technological affordances, ranging from coordination (Ling & Haddon, 2003; Ling & Yttri, 2002), to identity formation among users (Green, 2003; Lee, 2014; Ling, 2004), to mobile telephony within friendships or social networks (e.g. Campbell & Russo, 2003; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009a, 2009b). As a result of new technological affordances on social media, scholarly efforts have been made to understand how these multimedia symbolic performances have enabled young people to create culture, celebrating user triumph among peers rather than simply to coordinate everyday life events for informational purposes (e.g. Caron & Caronia, 2007; Grinter & Eldridge, 2003; Grinter, Palen, & Eldridge, 2006; Habuchi, 2005; Kaare, Brandtzaeg, Heim, & Endestad, 2007; Lacohe'e, Wakeford, & Pearson, 2003). Anecdotal evidences observed from my classroom are coherent with the notion Ling and Yttri (2002) maintained that teens and young adults have been a major force in the development and use of texting far beyond everyday life functional purpose to accomplish task; rather, their uses are for self-presentational and relational maintenance purposes such as joking, chatting, flirting, and so forth, and hyper-coordination is a term introduced to elaborate the multiple functions. The use of a wide variety of communication venues has become so salient among global youth, and a myriad of studies around the world attempt to understand why and how young people prefer texting to other means of communicating with friends (e.g. Kamibeppu & Sugiura, 2005; Ling, 2004b; Kuznekoff & Titsworth, 2013). Is preference to texting a matter of this generational cohort or life-phase phenomenon? Ling (2010) purports that overall use of short messaging services (SMS) is largely a life-phase phenomenon for the youth in their late teens rather than a pattern of generational cohort. The use of texting to strengthen relationships among peers seems to be especially significant at a life phase when the individual moves beyond the context of his or her parents' sphere of influence to an independently emancipated one. The transition from being largely within the context of his or her parents' sphere of influence to being a more or less independent emancipated individual has become more precarious as a result of industrialization. As Ling (2010) suggested, texting is more of a life-phase phenomenon rather than of a cohort. Namely, the use of texting can be seen as a significant coming-of-age ritual to secure a spot in the college through which the youth confront and confirm as they move through the different stages of life, which the researcher sees as a form of collegiate bonding in this study. Additionally, as a result of rapid technological development over time with some features of SMS—perpetual connectivity—on smartphone, the peers in college have increasingly become a prominent source that prepares one for a role as an adult at a time when the experience of the parent cannot be completely

mapped onto that of the child (Ling, 2010). Texting to gossip and bond as a constant, lightweight, and mundane presence in everyday life exerts a profound influence on the patterns of young people's networks (Ito, 2003; Ito & Okabe, 2005). Reciprocity in interpersonal communication, as much interlocutors unconsciously monitor in everyday life, is also applicable to what happens to texting via smartphones, and it can be a tool to facilitate conversation, perhaps more playfully and precariously, to bond and develop a sense of intimacy.

### **From SMS Textism to Multimedia Communicative Practice in Taiwanese Context**

Texting is a verb usually referencing textual communications sent through SMS from mobile phones. While a myriad of research largely documented how messaging apps have substituted SMS as tools for quick interpersonal interactions among smartphone users, this study attempts to address how LINE,<sup>1</sup> as a popular smartphone app in East Asia, is widely different from SMS as discussed earlier: first, its messages are free to begin with, often reliant on free WiFi connection in the school setting where college students have a limited subscription plan; groups are much easier to manage; messages consist of images, stickers, sound, videos, and so on. Interacting in LINE among users, in fact, is not usually identified as texters because it is a "chatting" taking place in multimedia format rather than assuming chatting formerly with a textual focus in excess. These differences between current "instant messaging apps" (or multimedia-based LINE) and their precedent "mobile phone texting" (or SMS), "textism" as discussed in previous studies, offered a fertile and auspicious terrain for a more up-to-date contextualized investigation.

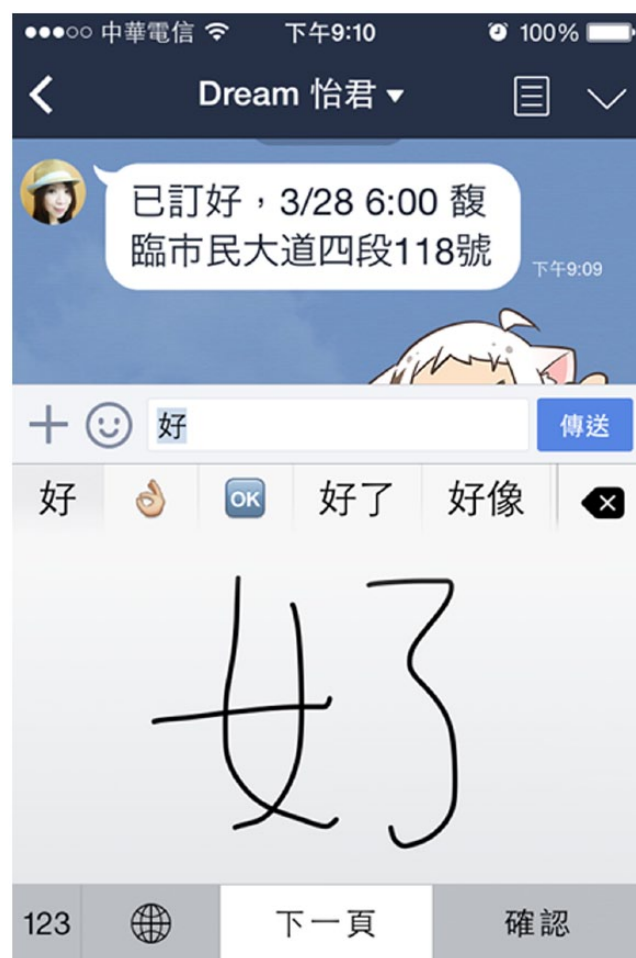
Ling's arguments were based on his research beyond the Chinese Mandarin context. While his observations may shed light on the implications of perpetual connectivity, his findings may have different ramifications if a study is conducted in a different linguistic context—in particular, as a language is not alphabetic-based. This research argues that with the new technological affordances enabling multimedia communicative venues to effortlessly create spectacle with stickers, photographs, and videos, as well as a new typing interfacing system built in the smartphone system, texting has become much friendlier and accessible for Mandarin Chinese users. Phonetic readings are more commonly used than root shapes. Phonetic reading input requires its users to digitally type in the phonetic letter, which can be Roman or others that approximate the sound of a particular ideogram plus the required tone mark. The user must subsequently select the desired character from homophones, which are common in Chinese. As seen below in Figure 1, it is easier and significantly faster to type English or any other Western languages with the relatively few Roman alphabet than Chinese



**Figure 1.** Smartphone keyboard for phonetic typing entries.

characters. Touch screen typing on smartphones or tablet computers could have seemed to create even more headaches. However, with the new handwriting-recognition system, the new user, particularly those not “digital natives,” enters the handwritten system easily. The system has become increasingly friendlier, such that when one writes more, the system can learn to identify his or her handwriting more accurately (Figure 2).

It is also due to these new affordances that Taiwanese society witnessed an influx of digital immigrants—from formerly Internet non-users to recently smartphone heavy users—many of whom are seniors having never texted before but quickly jump on the bandwagon. Texting in the Mandarin Chinese context in a sense had long been hampered due to the enormous barrier in the writing, and innovative uses of English and Mandarin Chinese hybrids were invented (Gao, 2006; Hsieh, Wang, & Wang, 2014) to temporarily overcome this. As a result of these new technological affordances, Taiwanese society witnesses a near extinction of this hybrid as well as the use of emoticons widely discussed on social media. When stickers, photographs, hyperlinks for references, and videos are readily available, the use of written



**Figure 2.** The new entry system on smartphone using handwriting recognition.

texts has been situated in a different context. The aspects of using texting earlier in the West remain tangibly validated in the Taiwanese context; for instance, brevity is important despite a varied degree of the prevalence of textism, and although texters draw on similar linguistic strategies shared across varied languages, the texters will always want to ensure that they are well understood in a demarcated group. There is a trend, probably facilitated by the new technological affordances that personalized expressions and dialect among young users are abundant (Liu, 2010), and SMS communities also witnessed burgeoning groups among the global youth who employ secret and exclusive linguistic and visual codes to communicate (Caron & Caronia, 2007; Liu, 2010).

Due to the unique technological diffusion pattern in Taiwan, this study unexpectedly found the frequent usage of SMS on LINE among freshmen parents, mostly mothers, who start experiencing the empty nest life period when children leave home for colleges. These parents started using SMS approximately 4 years ago when they adopted smartphone. This generally does not discredit Ling's (2010) arguments on texting as a life-phase phenomenon; rather, the use

of SMS often becomes popular at a time when individuals experience life transition, in this case, it is freshmen and their parents, as a way to reduce uncertainty and seek for social support. In Chinese Mandarin context, however, generational cohort also intersects with life-phase use, in the sense that Taiwanese parents in their 40s or older are generally not skilled in typing; in this case, it is the earlier form of texting. While they were not trained to type and socialize, they were acculturated to interact with their sons and daughters. This phenomenon seemingly suggests that technological and instrumental constraints have laid the framework of social media use. As the multimedia platform came along 5 years ago, the older generational cohort finds this friendlier, also quickly jumping on the bandwagon. While some in different generational cohorts may use more frequently, most parents “text to orchestrate their tasks instrumentally”—based on these freshmen in reflection of their parents’ uses. Earlier scholarly effort addressing social media uses on the multimedia platforms in Chinese context is scant, in part due to the rapid technological innovation with diverse platforms and their various affordances. Research about textism in Chinese context has paid attention to the linguistic innovations, given the number of Mandarin Chinese users and the intensity of their Internet use. Notably, Su (2003) explored four innovative linguistic styles in Bulletin Board System (BBS), one of the most popular computer-mediated communication venues in Taiwan in the late 1990s. Along the similar line, Fung and Carter (2006, 2007) address the emergence of a new hybrid variety of English in synchronous instant messaging system in Hong Kong. The new register, according to Fung and Carter (2006, 2007), represents a dual form of hybridity with a largely oral orientation than written. As much integrated into people’s lives, the ubiquitous and perpetual use of SMS may facilitate forms of interaction that are not possible to develop and maintain without using SMS. Given this, the beginning of the freshmen year often presents a period of time when the freshmen can physically uncouple from the sphere of the parents and work out their own direction. As freshmen enter college, they are frequently challenged with the duality of having to maintain a strong social network which is geographically distant and at the same time a weak, yet-to-be-built social network which is geographically close. As discussed earlier, the affordances of texting for perpetual contact and especially for expressive communication to bond within the existing teen circle with strong ties rather than to bridge. These new ties are critical for the freshmen to integrate successfully into college life, and as suggested by scholars that frequent interactions are important in sustaining these ties (Vanden Abeele & Roe, 2009). Although conversational comfort in gossiping during freshmen year was existent before the arrival of smartphone apps, this research postulates that the smartphone app—LINE—facilitates, accentuates, and even normalizes some communicative activities in the classroom setting for freshmen where the time and space had never been designed for such activities

during their high school days. Securing, maintaining, and sustaining new ties through LINE among freshmen come with compelling interests in the first month. While class attendance ensures the common presence in the classroom to succeed academically, these communicative efforts on LINE were paid and deemed imperative to gain social capital for a better survival in the college. Gossip via LINE on smartphones is thus more strong in formulating a small group, as the relationships among users are solidified and people “move on” to a different phase with a different emphasis of interaction, mostly more functional than social.

## Method: Focus Group and Ethnographic Interview

This study follows a framework for understanding that purports the affordance perspective of examining any burgeoning technologies, looking at the situated nature of language or, more broadly, multimodal symbolic interaction online via techno-biographic approach (Lee, 2014; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992). This study attempts to examine the life stories revolving around the freshmen’s uses of broader array of communicative venues on social media, which encompasses how to make meaning from the multiple linguistic and symbolic visual graphics in which traditional and newly blended codes are involved, posing challenges and opportunities for both users and those with whom they interact. The techno-biography approach is inspired by the traditional narrative approach to interviews, where the informant tells their significant events which allows them to make sense of their lived experiences—in this case, it is about the uses of social media, LINE, on smartphones, which has been embedded in our day-to-day activities. The linguistic discourse of text messaging conducted by a swath of scholars (e.g. Tagg, 2012; Tjora, 2011) and the tradition of symbolic interaction in this article are used as theoretical fundaments for understanding recent development of texting in social media as a global phenomenon (Tagg, 2012).

This study grew out of a 2-year, mixed-methods study, carried out between 2013 and 2015, that looks into the way in which freshmen deployed their multiple linguistic and symbolic resources on social media via smartphones through sustained and participatory ethnographic engagement from the researcher. The resources here include not only the various written utterances on smartphones but also a wide variety of multimodal communicative tools, such as stickers, photographs, hyperlinks, and video. The researcher drew study samples from media literacy course. All the participants were communication major. They were asked to fill out the questionnaires as a media use reflection exercise as all the students enrolled in a program in which most course-works require group project throughout their 4-year study. These students were often pressured to socialize so as to fit in the program, which lays a foundation of this research. Given this situation, this study does not pretend to be

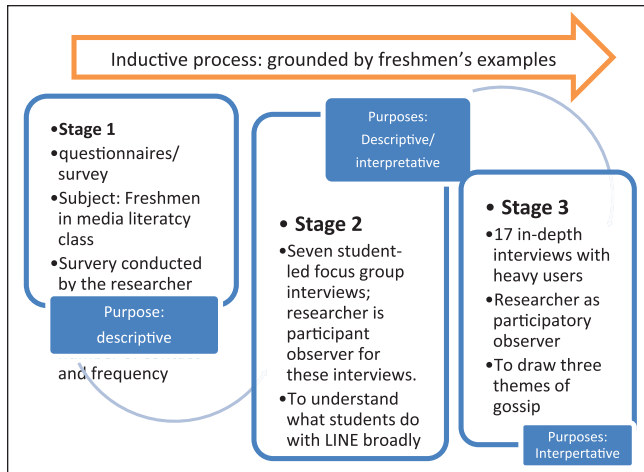


representative of other freshmen from other disciplines whose coursework enjoy more autonomy (e.g. law or science). In the first stage, a total of 188 freshmen participants completed an open essay survey as a pilot study taught by the researcher to understand some descriptive facts with respect to the use of smartphone, such as numbers of contacts, and frequencies and occasions they had correspondences on social media via smartphones. The researcher was surprised to discover that all of college freshmen use LINE on their smartphones, and on average, they have maintained 140 individual contacts and 40 group contacts. Given the nature of perpetual connectivity, 27 freshmen reported that they created more than 100 messages every day. It is necessary to unpack the vernacular term “gossip” in relation to the Chinese linguistic practice used by the informants: by and large, informants use “bagua” (八卦)—a term derived from a form of celebrity gossiping magazine in Hong Kong—but is nearly interchangeable with gossip in the English context. The term itself is most common and neutral—not judgmental or critical of these everyday life texting exchanges. Informants are sometimes consciously critical of this practice in the interview; thus, a number of terminologies are used in a self-effacing manner, such as *hulan* (唬爛), *lasai* (喇賽), *xialao* (瞎聊), or *chě dàn* (扯蛋). These terms are derogatory and vulgar, to a varied degree, which also imply their tacit acceptance of these linguistic practices being unproductive and meaningless, suggesting that these practices are a waste of time despite potential pleasures involved in the process. A term “*tucao*” (吐槽) may be used in a similar context but suggests to “talk back” to an authority. While each terminology has different sociolinguistic implications in the Taiwanese social media context, the informants nevertheless admittedly committed to these meaningless linguistic practices lacking any substance. Some informants were even “surprised” that their meaningless exchanges could be up for a study in the academic world by the researcher as a professor. For instance, as a student “complained” another student’s texting something meaningless during the class, he said that “I do not put my time there for *lasai* (喇賽), I got things ahead of me.” It may be offensive to the counterpart, depending on their original context of relationship. “*Lasai*”—literally meaning “shit stirring”—often is a practice condemned by fellows that nothing comes along after a lengthy and unproductive conversation.

As the researcher continues to examine the freshmen’s linguistic corpus, the researcher, however, came to realize how significantly gossiping between freshmen helped them to bond. Hence, in order to discover the ways from which gossiping among college freshmen derive meanings, seven peer-led focus group interviews were administered to explore how identities are constructed via the everyday texting activities via social media and how life-phase factors influence the uses of texting messages. While the informants agreed that negative gossips are common, it is relatively difficult for researcher, as a professor, to induce

such life narratives. With peer-led focus group interview discussion, the researcher was able to locate more through his students as key moderators trained by the researcher, which is reflected in the fact that students at times acknowledge the trust among them, willing to share the recipes for gossip and how they help create a boundary for ingroup “we-ness.”

Based on the transcribed raw data retrieved from the above focus group interviews, this researcher identifies a key motive to keep using LINE to chat in the class setting: “seen but un-replied” is deemed as a cruel refusal; thus, in order to maintain a tie, however tenuous, these freshmen simply have to continue to talk. Gossip lasts longer and generates more fun, thus is common. In the second stage, gossip can be classified into three genres—or linguistic repertoire that shapes informants’ communicative actions—which were also reaffirmed in third stage employing techno-biographic ethnographic interviews with 17 informants: (1) sarcastic gossip—negative but not malicious—on fellows, (2) gossip against authority (e.g. lecturer in the shared space and parent), and (3) celebrity gossip. Subsequently, the core data of this research are based on the details of techno-biographic ethnographic interviews with 17 informants self-identified as heavy users of these social media tools (see Appendix Table 1 for detailed information on these interviewees), who also agreed to share their correspondence corpus data with the researcher. These informants were on the researcher’s LINE network, and under their consent with privacy protection and ethical protocol in compliance with the Ministry of Science and Technology, they offer samples of their SMS correspondences for analysis, which were used by the researchers to look for written representations of issues. In addition to their agreement to be part of this research, the 17 informants were selected on the basis of meeting two criteria: heavy users of SMS and self-reportedly having the strongest ties with the classmate over the course of freshmen year. With the chance to win gift cards as incentive, 17 informants aged between 17 and 19 years (average: 17.9 years), 10 females and 7 males, were recruited as informants. They had been using a smartphone for between 2 and 5 years (average: 3.8 years). A specific conversation group on LINE was created exclusively for this research which the researcher can access to avoid the collapsed context when the informants did not mean to discuss with him. The purpose of the quantitative data was to provide a broad cross-section of student responses to questions about their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, everyday use of SMS, and the development of their friend network, and then to build upon emerging themes in the initial findings through qualitative datasets via interviews and analyses of students’ correspondences on SMS. Through this qualitative aspect of the methodology, this study sought to gain “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) that would reveal the complex, multilayered nature of linguistic practices, which are contextualized and continually evolving (Giddens, 1990; Manion, & Morrison, 2000). The three-stage process



**Chart 1.** Three-stage Inductive Qualitative Approach.

of data collection as well as their purposes is synthesized and visualized in Chart 1.

## Findings

### *The Symbolic Repertoire on Former SMS and LINE*

Partially as a result of new handwriting-recognition interfacing system built in the smartphone, texting became much friendlier and accessible for Mandarin Chinese users. Notably, gossip is rarely simply text-based. Rather, gossiping among texters is predominantly elicited and facilitated by visual cues, such as static or animated stickers, photographs and hyperlinks leading to a lengthier article. Apparently, these visual cues can convey a sense of playfulness, fun, and pleasure. However, this alone does not explain the prevalent use among the freshmen—the burdensome use of texting entry in Mandarin has been alleviated to some extent with the help of visual cues. Most of the small talks—such as how are you, miss you, and take care—have been replaced by stickers to save time from typing. Static and animated stickers were commonly used by the texters to save efforts and create a sense of having tailor-made, exclusive dyadic conversations. It is prevalent in the form of small talk, featuring phrases in Mandarin Chinese such as “how are you,” “miss you,” “great,” and “good job,” to name a few examples, as demonstrated in Appendix B which offers a glimpse of how these stickers look. They are increasingly common in animating format which enables some text to appear, to zoom in or to zoom out. The stickers are available for free download but are often packaged as part of a set and sold online. Each set comprises 20 stickers, and the interviewed sojourners typically have 20–50 sets of stickers, meaning that they have a total collection of 400 to 2,000 stickers from which to

choose. The informants in this study have 1,000 stickers on average.

Another common symbolic tool is photograph—over time, three types of photographs have been exchanged, namely, selfies, photos of places a person who was gossiped about has visited, or photos of food/meals. The social media texts among users, therefore, as a site can be seen as a playground with sets of communicative “toys” where texters initiate, receive, and respond to any linguistic performances. Furthermore, the aforementioned three types of gossips are not mutually exclusive from each other. For instance, students can criticize their fellows as teacher’s pets, photoshopping a picture featuring a teacher as a dog walker, and the fellow student as a dog. Occasionally, there are more elaborated work, making the pair of teacher and student into a four-panel comic serial. In this case, the gossip falls into the first two categories, which is about the fellow and also tries to undermine the authorities possessed by the higher power.

### *Usually Between Two of Us Reciprocally, but Not Always*

The informants indicate that social media with MMS function where two individuals trade pieces of gossip rather than in a group discussion is the most important arena for exchanging gossip between two interlocutors as the information revealed to each other is more easily perceived as exclusive. The smartphone affords texting SMS to facilitate a redefinition of social interaction, in many cases, there were “playfully awkward” moments, which informants pretend to gossip and, intentionally or unintentionally, to make someone they “gossip about” hear, respond, and confront. In many cases, using SMS on social media via smartphone may blur the distinction between private and public interaction. Virtual and electronic conversation-like mode of interaction—rather than using other forms of communication (face-to-face talk or passing post-it notes, for instance)—is potentially redefining situational interactive possibilities. While boyd (2010) classifies many social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, as a form of collapsed contexts where an individual’s separate segments of offline contacts are conflated in an single group in an online context, the new technological affordances of social media provide opportunities for users to draw on a wide range of platforms for dyadic interpersonal communication; therefore, the informants of this study ultimately avoid the aforementioned collapsed contexts. Besides, unlike the previous finding that with the development of stronger ties the users will eventually use more of social media to communicate (Haythornthwaite, 2002), the face-to-face gossips remain preferred among freshmen for gossiping purpose, and gossip is perceived only as an effective barometer to evaluate whether or not the correspondent is worthy of sharing more private and sensitive information. Goffman’s (1959) terms—backstage and frontstage communication—are useful in

explicating the process of interaction. There is an element of “interaction-consciousness,” the notion Goffman (1959, 1967, 1971, 1981) proposed to indicate the sense that the interaction between us is not only proceeding but also monitored meticulously between parties, and whether or not the disclosure of thoughts and feelings in the perceived ongoing interaction is reciprocal remains essential for the development of close relationships and friendships (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Giddens, 1991; Jamieson, 1998).

As a result of multimodal communicative tools, social media has afforded wider and more multimodal dissemination of information which the freshmen might otherwise have not been able to access. While the SMS remains popular for instrumental purposes to coordinate family and school events, these conversational strategies to bond retrieved from focus group interviews on life narratives is gossip. Gossip is popular and useful because it allows users to strategically disclose themselves at their comfort without having to delve into something private and sensitive immediately, which are enabled by stickers or photographs. For instance, when a gay man pays attention excessively to another male fellow student—taking pictures and engaging celebrity gossip—this type of multimedia gossip offers a fertile terrain where the counterpart can negotiate and derive polysomic meanings without having to ask him right at the front. It is in this context, after conducting seven focus group interviews, that 17 informants who volunteered to speak more with the researchers continued to disclose more in the in-depth interviews. Based on the raw data retrieved from the focus group interviews, freshmen’s gossip can be classified into three themes, which were also reaffirmed in the upcoming in-depth interviews: (1) sarcastic gossip—negative but not malicious—on fellows, which is more frequently initiated by males; (2) gossip against authority (e.g. lecturer in the shared space and parent—which takes place more among males than among females); and (3) celebrity gossip—which is apparently more like “girl’s talks—initiated and conversed among female freshmen,” which will be elaborated below.

### ***Sarcastic Gossip—Negative but Not Malicious—on Fellows***

The interviewed informants first expressed that they are drawn to gossiping on fellow students because it keeps them more informed about the nature of college lives in their immediate social circle. Compared to high school days, their social circle has grown much bigger and more challenging; gossiping helps freshmen form ingroup alliances based on codependence, developing trusting relationships and fostering social bonds, as suggested by Katz & Lai (2014). While the discussion about the third party in absence does not have to be negative, positive evaluations behind someone in private, according to informants 3, 6, and 7, sound inauthentic. Negative evaluations on someone

involve a greater degree of self-disclosure, exposing the interlocutors at higher risk to venture into an uncertain status. Given this, the risk is synonymous to the “mutual trust between us” invested in forming and substantiating the relationships. It is known that trading information and opinions always carry with them liability, and negative gossiping on someone especially puts interlocutors out on a limb. The gossips are often unfolded naturally with visual cues, especially photographs, as a hard proof of the point contributed to the interlocutor. The negative gossiping on fellow students by and large involves appearances and love affair, which represents 70% of retrieved corpus in this category. In this study, I use the term “sartorial security” coined by my informant to refer to the “appearance and mannerism” securitized by fellows. The following examples illustrate how and why interlocutor especially carries with negative gossip trust and intimacy. The first extract is archetypical between male students; the second pertains to a dialogue between two female texters:

#### Extract 1:

1. Brian: 你看到了嗎 Do you see it?
2. Ted: [a photograph of Cyndi]
3. Brian: 歐買尬 [an animating sticker shows— “Oh my God” in Chinese]
4. Ted: 莘蒂今天有化妝，而且有打扮 [Cyndi is wearing makeup and gets dressed up today.]
5. Brian: 喔，她有約會嗎? [an animating sticker—Does she have a date?]
6. Brian (male): 哈哈 [hehe . . . a sticker]
7. Brian: 看起來像是在做的 [The makeup she wears make her look like a hooker.]
8. Ted: 你好毒喔 [an animating sticker indicates that “you are so mean”]
9. Brian: 北漆啦 [an animating sticker indicates that “you are an idiot” in Taiwanese dialect]
10. Brian: 做的現在都看起來很清純啦 [The hooker now usually looks quite pure]

#### Extract 2:

1. Candy: 妳很花痴 You are anthomaniac (a sticker)
2. Candy: 他早就死會了 Sean is not available.
3. Candy: (corroborated with Sean going out with a unknown female hand in hand.)
4. Crystal: 那又不代表甚麼 That doesn’t mean anything. Sean is a playboy.
5. Candy: 我不認識那個女的 I don’t know the girl . . . do you?
6. Candy is offering another photo
7. Crystal: 他不可能是他女友，不像啊。She can’t be his girlfriend . . . she just doesn’t look like.
8. Candy: 可是他們牽手啊 They were holding hand in hand
9. Crystal: 我覺得他們之間沒火花 I don’t see any chemistry between them
10. Crystal: 我來看看他的臉書 Let me check on Sean’s facebook.

Candy is happily circulating Sean's photograph taken by her fellow, commenting on Sean, a ban-cao (班草 the most sought-after man in the class) to Crystal, that Sean is not available any longer because he is seeing a girl and there is a hard proof. Crystal, however, disagrees that going out with a female hand in hand exempts him from being a candidate of boyfriend on whom for their common friend, Jessie, who has long been crushing. Notably, this type of gossip tends to be prolonged as new evidences would be unveiled and circulated, number of participants involved increased rapidly. Subsequently, in this case, Lucy who joined the discussion overturned their conclusion with a photo featuring Sean and a male friend looking at each other laughing out happily. Lucy inferred from the picture that Sean is closeted gay, trying to fool female fellow students by going out with female friends in high profile. In another case, Jessica circulated a photograph posted by Nako, which is obviously so flattering that even people close to Nako cannot recognize the photo as Nako:

#### Extract 3

1. Jessica (showing a selfie photo of feminized Nako): 讓我死了吧 (a sticker showing please simply kill me in Chinese).
2. Cindy: 這不可能是Nako (This can't be Nako).
3. Jessica: 就是! It is.
4. Cindy: 妳照一千張選一張也會像蔡依林啊 You know if you take a thousand of pictures, one would look like Jolin Tsai.
5. Jessica: 照騙嗎 You know a photo is a lie (Chao4-pan4, 照騙).

Negative gossip, often comprising sarcasm, in a way playfully entertains freshmen because comments followed by photographs and stickers poke fun on the subject matter all the time. Random, asynchronous, and non-linear dialogues among the informants are facilitated. Although the fact that technological affordances have permitted the sender to deliberate over the content and form of the message allowed an easy informality of asynchronous conversation, people engaged in gossiping are impatient if the counterpart is perceived as "not around." In fact, one of the most popular stickers in Taiwan features a text, which questions the interlocutors: "Are you listening?" (你在聽嗎) or "Seriously, are you listening?" (你到底有沒有在聽?) On the multimedia messaging system LINE, whether texters have read and when has a response been posted are clearly recorded, which imposes immense pressure on the texters engaged in many conversations simultaneously. But what kind of pleasure or meanings texters derive from such enormous communicative efforts to sustain a large number of dyadic interaction?

### Gossip Against the Authority

In the life narrative retrieved, gossip among informants often arose when there is an authority figure from higher power critical of the interlocutors—in this study, mostly instructors and parents. In order to create emotional bonds, the members

text to each other. The following example illustrates a typical gossip episode where the initiator offers an explanation along with the initial evaluation:

#### Extract 4

1. Jon: 你晚到了 You are late
2. Jon: 你不知道颱風剛掃過 You don't know that the typhoon has just swept
3. Bo: 怎麼了? What?
4. Jon: 剛老師教我們報告重做 The professor had our group to redo the presentation.
5. Jon: xxx (Four letter word).
6. Bo: 有甚麼問題? What's wrong?
7. Bo: 老師沒講清楚他要甚麼。 The professor did not explain clearly about what he wants.
8. Jon: 沒人知道他在講什麼。 Nobody knows what he wants.
9. Bo: 老師眼睛長在頭上, 沒有正眼看過我。 Teacher's eyes were on his head never actually looking at us.
10. Jon: 哈, 他昨晚跟他老婆吵架吧。 Well, he probably fought with his wife earlier not in a good mood.
11. Bo: 他有老婆? 誰受得了他啊? He has a wife? What type of woman can put up with him?

The pleasure of taking an instructor's pictures is allegedly enormous because the informants can chat behind the instructors and instantly come up with a counterargument against the authority. This is particularly true for my informants who attended courses in general where about a hundred students are gorged in a small auditorium. Students can share a piece of animated work featuring instructors blinking in an extremely unflattering sense while calling someone's name. It is so much fun to take in some raw photographs and edit them in the class. Particularly if you just procure a new smartphone, you want to know how good the camera and their editing software can get. Bo admittedly took thirty-something pictures in the class and edited them to create an animated sticker, which a large number of fellow students received and were reportedly quite entertained.

Another common authority figure is parents. There is a prevalent presence of gossip episodes in which initiators first present an event using a photograph and then add explanations with an exaggerating impact on their initial identification. Examples of good material for gossip on someone include picture of a room messed up by a dog raised by texter's mother and pictures of some poorly designed cheapies, rather than branded product bought by gossip initiator's parents as a birthday gift. The emotional bonds escalated as texters on both sides move toward justified negative evaluation as consensus. Upon examining our data for the basic structure of gossip, we began to see some variability in how an initiator begins a gossip episode, peaking in turns with facts presented, and then some initiators added explanations and exaggerated affect to their initial identification and negative evaluation of the target.



There are times when initiators present gossip encounters resistance, nevertheless, which is why two well-secured ties may not chat and bond using gossip on family issues. First, it requires elaborated description far complicated than what photographs and stickers can convey. The self-disclosure on parents requires greater sophistication of linguistic capability detailing one's upbringings and life trajectories beyond the terrain that the social media texting system can afford. Sometimes, poor gossip adversely affects the existing relationships because "as close as we are," the interlocutor appears not having anything better to offer. For instance, some informants criticized their professors or parents, and they received responses "How old are you? Are you 7 or 8?" "Could you be a grown-up?" "Could you stop whining?" All these gossips are recipe for texting usually complemented with selfie and animating icons. However, this resistance is highly situated—it is hard to tell whether or not the gossip receives genuinely unhappy response. As a result of using multimodal communicative venues, sometimes the interlocutors take such ironies as a way to bond. For instance, there is a well-known sticker that condemns people as "You are idiotic—be a grown-up." Sometimes the testimonial confession of living a stupid life—gossip all day for nothing—can strengthen social bonding. Notably, based on the interviews, male students are more inclined to commenting on female appearances, while female informants disclose familial issues and gossip about romantic affairs far more than their male counterparts.

### Celebrity Gossip

On a bit more benign manner, the researcher locates another type of gossip, which is about celebrities. When asking these informants about the way in which they utilized celebrity gossip for their pleasurable pursuit, they inferred that in the multimedia texting environment, the communication is highly intertextual—one can easily share photograph or hyperlink with another individual. For instance, when Aaron Yan (炎亞綸)<sup>2</sup> commented on how too much rain causes earthquake and was criticized by natural scientists as ignorant, Eva texts to Dream-dream the hyperlink, followed by a comment "See . . . your husband is retarded." Dream-dream texts her photoshopped wedding picture in which she is a bride with Wu Chun (吳尊),<sup>3</sup> her new husband. Eva expressed a sense of admiration to Dream-dream because no one under the sun like her had the chance to happily marry good-looking male celebrities. In this study, five female informants and one male informant experienced sharing celebrity stories to forge bonds with other female students. Teddy, a self-identifying gay male informant, in this study often impersonates Jolin Tsai (蔡依林),<sup>4</sup> updating Tsai's life testimonies with video clips featuring his own dancing imitating Jolin to many texters individually.

There are two purposes of celebrity gossip engaged by informants: first, to demonstrate accumulated symbolic



**Figure 3.** This is a photo used for the above discussion. Sandy argues that the protagonist was cute but the luggage is ugly. The supporter of Kim commented that the classic luggage is always plain.

capitals related to the celebrities and, second to engage in identity-playing game among texters. The former pays particular attention to the ways in which texters draw on knowledge on the celebrities (e.g. products endorsed, updated event, itinerary), relating the celebrity narrative to their daily life events that are of significance. The latter refers to a form of performance in which the texter claims the wives/girl-friends of the celebrities. They do care for civic issues, but they are too heavy to be discussed on SMS, for instance, the Commenting on Samsonite luggage endorsed by Kim Soo-hyun, a Korean superstar known for a TV series *My Love from the Star*, as K texted (extract 5). The photo is shown further below as Figure 3 for further reference:

1. K: The love for Kim Soo-hyun cannot be untrue.
2. Sandy (not informant): Why?
3. K: You see the luggage . . . so ugly. (the hyperlink is added) How could this piece of junk be popular?
4. Sandy: It is not ugly; it is simply plain . . . not decorative.
5. K: Kim Soo-hyun is ripping off Taiwan now, with stuff he endorses and the café enterprises like crazy . . . all because of you silly girls.
6. Sandy: Don't you see most classic styles are plain?

The discussions about what to buy often were vehemently negotiated among parties with different beliefs toward consumption. Another common scenario is that it is often fans who share information about their beloved celebrities. Extract 6 illustrates this:

1. H: Hi, I have one piece of delight to report.
2. Bobo (not informant): What?
3. H: I have dreamed of Lee Minhoo last night.
4. Bobo: Oh, no.
5. H: How could you do this to me?
6. H: You dreamed away him from me.
7. Bobo: You have to work hard, and also with a bigger dream catcher (a sticker).

The daily acts revolving around the star, in this study, mostly Korean, are exaggerated, so fans can feel on edge of others. Additionally, in these correspondences, it was as if an

understanding of celebrity “trivia” served as a connection between users, corroborated with facts not available on the official site. The fans of Korean stars seemed to be united by an appreciation of a particular, outlandish media text. One informant was particularly eloquent in highlighting such pleasures, stating that “I am so thrilled to manage the fan’s group and get to know the star’s itinerary first; you’ll go on LINE’s SMS system, announcing this to top-rank fellows. We are very selective and disciplined unlike . . . Kids are not allowed.” (Informant 5) In this way, the informants seemed to be negotiating Pierre Bourdieu’s (1998) work on judgments of taste, preference, and cultural distinction. In this instance, it was an awareness of recent, revealing or scandalous celebrity, stories that accrue power for the fans.

The “techno-biographic ethnographic interviews” conducted by the researcher help unveil the college freshmen’s life histories of technological use and their changing life trajectories with gossiping. Within probably 2 months since the freshmen were enrolled, gossip has been prevalent to enhance the bonding among them, mostly through dyadic process to ensure their exclusivity and avoid the collapsed context, as mentioned earlier. Gossiping strengthens some ties and weakens some others—particularly when both parties find that there is not much they can offer to each other. For instance, there were times the interviewees were confronted with a sticker: “Be a grown-up,” “go back to elementary school.” It is also common that some freshmen were not into gossip, thus simply leaving their names as dormant and mostly “unused” and “disposable” contacts on the list of contacts for other students. By and large, freshmen did not leave the class abruptly; instead, they tried to ensure and maintain a sense of belonging and attempted to affiliate one or two small groups with strong ties.

## Conclusion and Discussion

Genres retrieved from life narratives on individual differences in the use of smartphone multimedia texting system illustrate how identities have become a complicated representational site through which multiple linguistic, technological, and economic forces are negotiated and reshaped. This study contextualized how LINE, as a new multimedia platform on smartphone with new affordances in Taiwan, makes gossiping among freshmen easier than before. The swift switches from “private” nature of dyadic to small group communication making gossiping easier for college freshmen. The new affordances also point to a new direction as of how gossip becomes a visually driven and vernacular linguistic practice through which social bonding is strengthened and maintained. Consistent with what scholars argued with textism, gossip in this study can be situated in diverse local practices that are collectively performed (Liu, 2009; Tagg, 2012). While it may well be speculated that almost everybody from children to elders chats on LINE, this study purports that college freshmen during their first enrollment on campus represent an active and auspicious segment to gossip. This argument

seems to speak with Ling’s (2010) studies, but it should be noticed that students in most high schools or elementary schools were prohibited from using that. Besides, Taiwanese elementary or high schools do not open free WiFi access to their students, which refrains the technological accessibility from some potential avid younger users. The first few months in college present a rare life transition where freshmen, often disoriented, become better equipped with personal smartphone and free campus WiFi access. Given this, freshmen apparently make best use of the renowned privilege to socialize. After several months, freshmen were overwhelmed and thus moved on to invest on the circles and cliques less dispensable. College freshmen are heavily loaded with courses which require them to be in the same classroom, and direct verbal communication is strictly prohibited, which may render the use of LINE more attractive. It is not the case for other age segment. For instance, for elder Taiwanese, on one hand, they may suffer more from not being able to command LINE technologies; on the other hand, LINE is often used for engaging in brief, courteous small talks among friends (say hello and thanks note), if not for utilitarian purpose to orchestrate events.

Motivation to communicate increases with the strength of a social tie, and strongly tied pairs communicate more and use more media to interact (Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 1998). Nevertheless, informants indicated that gossiping among freshmen is a life-phase phenomenon, usually lasting 2 or 3 months until a solid social network with stronger ties in an offline context has been secured. This can be exemplified by a common life trajectory: These freshmen started with 160 individual new contacts but instantly formulated three to five key small groups in 2 months. Once these small groups are formulated and secured, they did not go beyond those contacts outside the small groups, while very few strong individual ties in these groups might communicate individually to avoid fragmented contexts. Over time, the freshmen have gradually reduced their amount of time investing in such “communicative efforts.” Although social media users are technologically afforded to create spectacle along with written texts, these communicative efforts were expressed to be emotionally exhausting despite a face value of being enjoyable and entertaining. Gossip is thus important as these freshmen move through a life phase where their social networks are filled with a large quantity of, but uncertain, weak ties; these gossips provide sources of conversational comfort and sartorial security, creating a safer net so that the freshmen can navigate through their precarious interstitial space so as to consolidate with a smaller number of strong ties without disclosing themselves excessively. Unlike ubiquitous media discourse of textism as an indecipherable code, this article presents a set of empirical textual data which suggest that new affordances can nourish various non-standard communicative forms, all of which are highly localized but “semantically recoverable” (Crystal, 2008). As discussed earlier, the result of this research is resonant to a notion that young people developed strong ties through texting on social network, not

necessarily accepting that face-to-face communication is superior to these social networking sites (e.g. Igarashi et al., 2005; Livingstone, 2002). However, the findings of this study by and large are consistent, but the use of gossip on social media is more effective in solidifying prospective weak ties, developing these relationships further. It is less common to gossip on social media so as to maintain and sustain the existing strong ties—since their chances of face-to-face communication have grown over time. The texting on social media has afforded their Taiwanese users the dynamic modes of textual and visual representation to either instrumentally coordinate events within families and school or playfully connect with one another. As scholars argued (Liu, 2010; Tagg, 2012) that gossip can be situated in diverse local practices that are collectively performed, the results shed light upon how texting becomes a glocalised practice through an accumulation of highly vernacular and localized linguistic practices. This study also seeks to relate gossip to the construction of social identity and its consequences for ingroup bonding and outgroup alienation (e.g. Goffman, 1967). In the process, gossiping helps facilitate bonds by showing others we trust them enough to share information. Gossip can be a tool for establishing mutually agreed-upon group norms that build solidarity among individuals with varied cultural backgrounds as they are geographically dispersed and recently relocated, as cases discussed in previous studies on gossip in diasporic communities (e.g. Dreby, 2009; Drotbohm, 2010; Skolnik, Lazo De la Vega, & Steigenga, 2012). While precariousness marks a common lived experience (Butler, 2004), the beginning of the freshmen year presents such precariousness as they physically uncouple from the sphere of the parents and work out their own direction. Gossip thus, as a source of conversational comfort and sartorial security, creates a safer net so that the freshmen can navigate through their precarious interstitial space without disclosing themselves excessively. SMS has afforded wider and more multimodal dissemination of information through which the freshmen might otherwise have not been able to manage such many uncertain but promising weak ties.

This also suggests that the rise of new private spaces would lead to the weakening of traditional forms of parental or teacher's authority and potentially point to the early psychological and social emancipation of young people. However, the result also speaks to another salient topic in studying mobile communication is that mobile engagement may render "tele-cocooning"—the creation of one's own private spaces through mobile media despite physically situating in public (Habuchi, 2005; Katz & Lai, 2014; Kobayashi, Boase, Suzuki, & Suzuki, 2015). While changes in communication technology, contradictions in social relationships—autonomy independence—have manifested themselves in the process of ongoing negotiation. As individuals perpetually engage in their private mediated spaces with a simultaneous combination of different modes of everyday action that may otherwise take place at work, at home, or during leisure time hanging out, the aforementioned tele-cocooning experiences are clearly

demonstrated, which have also blurred the appropriate social roles for particular social setting.

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### Notes

1. LINE is a multiplatform, multimedia instant messaging application created by Japanese branch of Korean company Naver, popular in East Asia, with 560 million active users worldwide as of 2016, with 18 million users in Taiwan—comprising about 80% of Taiwanese population.
2. Aaron Yan Aaron Wu Keng-Lin (traditional Chinese: 吳庚霖; simplified Chinese: 吴庚霖; pinyin: Wú Gēnglín; born 20 November 1985) is a Taiwanese Mandopop singer, commercial model and actor. He is the youngest member of Taiwanese Mandopop boy band Fahrenheit.
3. Wu Chun was a member of Taiwanese Mandopop vocal quartet boy band Fahrenheit from its debut in 2005 to June 2011 and still has a close bond with his former band mates. He was the last and oldest member to join the boy band and was the bass vocalist of the group.
4. Jolin Tsai (Chinese: 蔡依林) is a Taiwanese singer, songwriter, dancer, actress, and entrepreneur. Often referred to as "Asian Madonna," she has achieved great popularity and fame in Greater China and has a dedicated fan base worldwide.

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### Author Biography

Hong-Chi Shiau is a Professor of Gender Studies and the Communications Management Department at Shih Hsin University. His research interests include social/mobile media, identity politics, global media system, and queer studies. He received his PhD from Temple University (2003) and had taught in the United States before his academic career in Taiwan.

## Appendix A

**Table 1.** Informant Description.

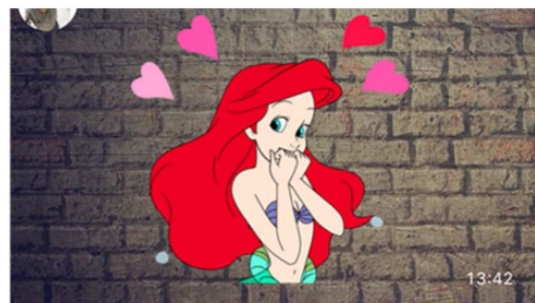
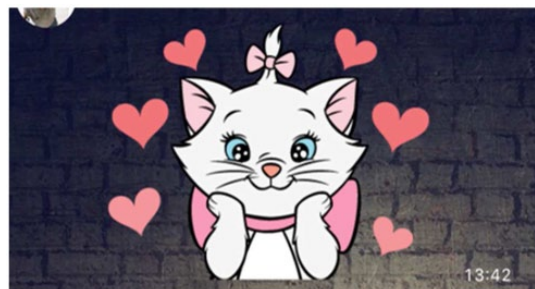
Name	Gender, age	Number of frequent contacts versus all contacts	Estimated no. of texts per day	Social media use
A	Female, 17	8; 189	220	LINE, Facebook, Instagram
B	Female, 18	11; 193	185	LINE, Skype, Facebook, WhatsApp
C	Female, 17	7; 125	185	LINE, Facebook, Instagram
D	Female, 18	6; 167	140	LINE, Facebook, Instagram
E	Female, 18	9; 128	155	LINE, Facebook, Instagram
F	Female, 18	7; 190	125	LINE, Facebook, Instagram
G	Female, 18	5; 225	200	LINE, Skype, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp
H	Female, 17	8; 188	180	LINE, Skype, Facebook, WhatsApp
I	Female, 17	7; 133	140	LINE, Facebook, Instagram
J	Female, 18	11; 220	150	LINE, Facebook, Instagram
K	Male, 23	16; 280	150	LINE, Facebook, Instagram
L	Male, 18	19; 233	170	LINE, Facebook, Instagram
M	Male, 18	12; 190	180	LINE, Skype, Facebook
N	Male, 18	8; 201	180	LINE, Skype, Facebook
O	Male, 17	7; 123	150	LINE, Skype, Facebook, WhatsApp
P	Male, 17	4; 88	160	LINE, Facebook, Instagram
Q	Male, 18	9; 129	120	LINE, Facebook, Instagram

All informants' details were kept confidential, and names and identity particulars were changed to ensure anonymity. Instead of randomly assigning each informant a name, I used alphabetic order to identify each.

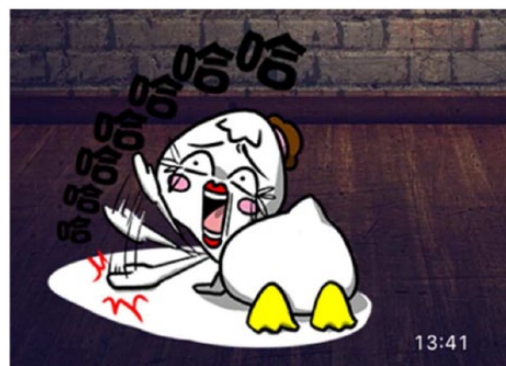
## Appendix B

The stickers are available for free download but are often packaged as part of a set and sold online. Each set comprises 20 stickers, and the interviewed sojourners typically have 20–50 sets of stickers, meaning that they have a total collection of 400–2,000 stickers from which to choose. The following stickers are voted as the most popular, in part because they come when the users download the SMS (LINE) on smartphones. Animating stickers are common. All the stickers illustrated below are animating.

Stickers indicate kiss, love, and care.



A sticker indicates laugh out loud.



A sticker indicates anger, not knowing what to say.

