

What Does Emoji Do to Us: Emojis in Online Communication

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Abstract

In our contemporary society, characterized by ever-expanding social groups, the management of interpersonal connections poses new challenges. This study explores the impact of emojis in online communication, investigating whether the quantity and sentiment of emojis influence individuals' willingness to assist. The research combines quantitative analysis through a questionnaire with qualitative insights obtained from semi-structured interviews. Findings suggest that multiple positive emojis increase the likelihood of assistance, while the influence of multiple negative emojis is less pronounced. The varying interpretations of emojis, the nature of the requests, and participants' perceptions of time commitment emerge as crucial factors shaping responses. The study contributes to understanding the intricate dynamics of online communication and the role emojis play in shaping social interactions.

Keywords: online communication; multiple emojis; social interactions; trust.

Introduction

In our society today, we live in increasingly large groups. The growth of such groups brings new challenges to managing our social relationships. Navigating how to efficiently maintain interpersonal connections in this vast social network has become a new challenge. Therefore, there is an urgent need to find more time-efficient methods to handle these relationships. As societal structures continually evolve, the efficient management of social relationships becomes increasingly crucial (Gamble & Gowlett, 2014).

While pursuing more efficient social connections, I discovered an entertaining and expressive approach—emojis. These small icons not only add a playful element to my communication but also serve as tools for establishing deeper connections within the expansive social network. By sharing humorous emojis, I found that people are more likely to understand and accept my emotions, facilitating more positive interactions. This is not just a social skill but also a creative and entertaining form of social language, allowing me to integrate more effortlessly and joyfully into the vast societal network.

Simultaneously, during the 7 Papers assignment for Research Fundamentals, I chose emojis as my research theme. This decision stems not only from my fondness but also reflects my profound interest in this field. Through researching the origin, development, and application of emojis in social media, I gradually realized the significance and potential research value within this domain.

Background

As social networks continue to expand, we rely more on online communication to strengthen them. In the past, such communication was often limited to text, which put a certain amount of pressure on us to communicate. However, we

are gradually realizing that purely textual expressions cannot fully convey emotions and contexts. As a result, we began to focus on messages related to elements beyond text, such as emoticons, images, and other additional information, to convey our thoughts and feelings more richly and comprehensively. As an alternative to written language, emojis make up for the lack of non-verbal cues and are very suitable for social media communication, so they are used more and more frequently in online communication. This shift has not only made online communication more lively and informative, but it has also provided us with more ways to express ourselves.

Generally, people use emojis for three reasons. First, the use of emojis to experience a virtual face-to-face interaction enables participants to communicate emotionally (Kaye, Malone, & Wall, 2017).

In addition, the use of emojis can also improve the efficiency of information processing. Boutet, LeBlanc, Chamberland, and Collin (2021) set up an experiment where participants judged the semantics of pairs of sentences and emojis that also had positive/negative/neutral attitudes and rated the semantics as positive/negative/neutral properties, and they all used a head-mounted video eye-tracking system to judge how efficiently participants processed this information by the time spent on each item. When there are emojis in the sentence, people need less information and spend less time building digital interactions.

The third point is social attribution, where the use of emojis can convey social information. Zhang et al. (2021) conducted three experiments on whether people will give more money when receiving requests including emojis to study the impact of positive emojis, negative emojis, and sending emojis to acquaintances on college students' online interpersonal trust. The conclusions suggest that emojis can have an impact on social behaviors, social interactions, and even personality traits, as they convey subtle cues of trust, reducing psychological distance and increasing the likelihood of trust.

All these lead to my research question: Whether positive/negative emojis will influence people in some social situations, especially online trust? For this issue, I have proposed the following hypotheses: "People will be more willing to help when receiving more positive emojis" and "People will be more reluctant to help when receiving more negative emojis".

Method

My research focuses on whether or not it affects people's online trust when the number of emojis increases. To study this,

I used a questionnaire¹ developed by myself and posted on Instagram and WeChat platforms. At the end of the survey, some of the participants were also involved in semi-structured interviews to gain more insight into what they were thinking when they filled out the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was structured as follows: participants were given a total of two sets of questions, each of which appeared in pairs. The scenario for the questions was receiving a private message asking if you would be willing to help fill out a questionnaire. In the first group, a positive/negative emoji was added at the end of the question, respectively, and in the second group, three corresponding emojis were added. Participants are also asked about their first intention perception of the request and whether they would help without thinking about it.

The screenshot of the survey is shown in Figure 1.

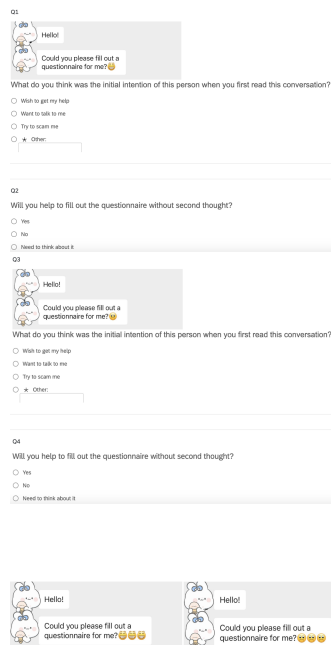


Figure 1: Screenshot of the survey

Result

I have received a total of 51 valid responses, and the primary findings from the analysis of these responses are as follows:

Table 1 shows the results of the question "Are you willing to help without second thoughts?". It can easily be seen that the positive groups gain higher trust than the negative ones with more people answering yes and fewer "Need to think about it".

In relation to the hypothesis involving multiple emojis, I posed two questions: If someone sends you multiple positive

Table 1: Results 1

	Positive	Negative	Three positive	Three negative
Yes	59%	47%	63%	47%
No	6%	12%	14%	18%
Need to think	35%	41%	24%	35%

Table 2: Results 2

	Three positive one
Yes	54%
No	46%

emojis, would you be more willing to offer assistance? And, if someone sends you multiple negative emojis, would you be less willing to offer help? According to Tables 2 and 3, it can be observed that individuals are indeed more inclined to provide assistance when presented with multiple positive emojis. However, the group exposed to multiple negative emojis did not strongly support the hypothesis. Subsequent interviews revealed that many participants believed that multiple negative emojis indicated a genuine and significant difficulty on the part of the sender, signaling an urgent need for help.

Discussion

Following the quantitative analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants willing to talk about their experiences. This qualitative section aimed not only to explore the impact of emoji sentiment on online trust but also to gain insight into participants' thinking about the questions and their responses. The focus of the interview questions was to identify specific factors that contributed to the limitations of the experiment and to gather suggestions for improvement. I interviewed 5 participants in total.

Firstly, participants universally pointed out the varying interpretations individuals have regarding emojis, which geographical and cultural factors may influence. Even on different social platforms, the same emoji might carry different meanings. To prevent ambiguity, it is crucial to explicitly define the specific meanings of different emojis before the commencement of the experiment.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that for participants, filling out the questionnaire was not an overly challenging task. This implies that the requests' nature may influence the experi-

Table 3: Results 3

	Three negative one
Yes	44%
No	56%

¹https://leidenuniv.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6bt7e8FLk2Vpk2

mental outcomes. One participant mentioned that if a stranger were to request money from her, she might not respond as positively as she would to a request from a familiar individual. This highlights that the nature of the request could impact participants' responses.

In addition, the design of the questionnaire is relevant. Observing that participants generally took 1-2 minutes to complete the questionnaire, with even the longest duration being two and a half minutes, raises the consideration that participants' perceptions of the time commitment might affect their willingness to participate. In my personal experience, when seeing that a questionnaire is expected to take 5 minutes or longer, I tend to hesitate before deciding whether to participate, potentially influencing participant expectations and engagement.

Last but not least, one participant mentioned that she habitually sends three identical emojis simultaneously. For her, seeing more emojis makes her feel more comfortable and connected. This personal habit may influence her responses to the questionnaire.

Conclusion

This study delves into the role of emojis in online communication, shedding light on their impact on social interactions and trust. The findings reveal that while multiple positive emojis enhance individuals' willingness to assist, the influence of multiple negative emojis is less straightforward. The research underscores the importance of considering diverse interpretations of emojis, the nature of communication requests, and participants' perceptions of the survey process.

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