Emoji Culture on the WeChat Platform

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Abstract: Emojis are being used more and more frequently in social media communication, and they are appearing in more and more styles in contemporary society. Emojis transcend other visual and graphic languages and are popular across the boundaries of languages, races, cultures, etc. However, the reason for the increasing use of Emojis has not been given much attention. This study attempts to analyze and investigate the reasons why Emojis are actively used on social media. This study refers to research materials in psychology and communication and focuses on WeChat, the most frequently used social media platform in China. This study argues that Emojis have become a way for people to express their emotions quickly and accurately. Beyond textual expression, Emojis can arouse people's empathy. The use of Emojis makes emotions and feelings visible, which plays a role in indenting social distance.

Keywords: Emojis, social media, WeChat, visual design

1.   Introduction

People are gradually familiar with the use of Emojis in daily communication, and they subtly become a powerful communication method to express emotions, replacing texts. Emojis have a lower threshold than words and languages and help people cross the barriers of race, language, and culture. In the rapid development of the Internet era, Emojis have become an important force for transmitting information. People's cognition of Emojis is still in the use stage and at a shallow level. Emojis, as a gradually popular culture, have existed for a long time. With billions of expressions used today, the impact and value of Emojis on people's daily communication should be understood. At the same time, to develop future Emojis design and direction, this paper focuses on the daily interactions between Emojis users on digital media platforms.

The active degree of Emojis was verified by studying the usage of Emojis on the Wechat platform. Most scholars have studied Twitter and Instagram due to their widespread popularity. In 2016, Tim Highfield analyzed Instagram as a highly visual social media platform and shared insights into the gradual visualization of social media [1]. This article analyzes WeChat, the most widely used social platform in China. At present, classifying facial expressions according to emotions has become the main analysis method. In a 2015 research paper by Petra Kralj Novak, Emojis' sentiment rankings were presented visually for the first time [2]. Emojis were included in 4% of annotated tweets out of 1.6 million tweets and 751 Emojis were used to formulate the rankings. Studies have shown that people use Emojis to express positive emotional attitudes and receive more popular messages. Bjarke Felbol expanded on this point in his 2017 article [3]. When

people analyze Emojis for their sentimental value, Emojis can respond in more diverse ways. For example, Eva Hauthal's analysis of the emotions contained in memes on the Twitter platform was applied to see European's attitudes towards Brexit, and the emotional differences of memes were used to estimate the level of support for Brexit [4]. This is also the value and practical application of emotion-based sentiment analysis. In this context, the Emojis on WeChat that are becoming popular and showing their application value, are analyzed.

By reading literature and querying resources on the Internet, this paper analyzes the emotional value added by WeChat in Emojis, the proportion of positive and negative emotions, the interpretation of functions, and the proportion of usage to draw inferences. WeChat's success with Emojis is not accidental but a clever design based on visual communication. Emojis, from a visual point of view, with bright colors and simple shapes, are easier to make people intuitive and have impressive characteristics. Netizens using emojis can meet their emotional appeal more, and for the users of different regions and different cultural backgrounds, Emojis break the language and cultural barriers. Under the background of globalization, the WeChat platform deconstructs these images and symbols, providing people with a transmission power that cannot be ignored.

2.   The Origin and Extension of Emoji

Emojis were first created by Shigetaka Kurita and have become popular among Internet and mobile users in Japan. Kurita designed 176 12-by-12-pixel Emojis covering people, places, and things.
In August 2014, Oxford Dictionary Online added "Emoji" to its new vocabulary, meaning that it has become an official word. Although the words look similar to "emoticon", they are not the same. Emoji means "picture" (E) plus "character" (moji). Emoticons are graphic symbols that replace words or concepts. The difference is that emoticons can be typed with a keyboard, while Emoji is a sketchy drawing. Emoticons are punctuation marks. These emoticons are usually read with one's head turned: :-), :-), :-(. In contrast, "Emojis" are small figurative shapes with colors.

When people talk about the growing popularity of Emoji culture, it is natural to compare it to a new way of speaking. Some even classify it as a form of communication that devalues textual information and reduces the need for language. However, when people look back to the hieroglyphs and cuneiform texts of early civilizations, Emojis become traceable [5]. It is more fitting to describe them as a new form of communication that is more widely used by new generations of social groups. The use of Emojis has appeared in many scenarios in life, such as advertising, brand symbols, and online communication.

2.1. The Development of Emoji

Apple was the biggest contributor to Emoji's global spread. In order to bring the iPhone to the Japanese market, Apple has decided to include Japanese consumers' favorite Emojis in iOS 2.2. At that time, iOS Emojis were only available in Japan.

In 2007, Google made a proposal to the Unicode Consortium, which maintains the standards of characters across platforms and languages to standardize Emojis. Soon, other companies like Apple backed the proposal.

In 2010, the Unicode consortium accepted the proposal and officially included Emojis as part of its standard. In 2011, Apple officially added Emojis to iOS 5. In 2013, Google added Emojis to Android. So far, the two operating systems that dominate the smartphone market have Emojis. It also marks the full expansion of Emoji.

2.2. Emojis Usage

As a new way of communication in the digital media era, Emojis are used more and more frequently by users as an auxiliary emotional communication tool and an auxiliary way of expression. The report from Nikola Ljube ˇ Si and Darja Fi ˇ Se measured the density of Emoji use in tweets around the world [6]. After using 17 million data points, Indonesia, the country with the highest usage, came out on top with 46.5 percent of its tweets containing Emojis. The top seven are all in Africa with over 30%. The data only count memes that come with apps that are included on the Twitter platform. Adding different media platforms in different countries would push this figure even higher. All over the world, people are becoming familiar with new forms of communication attached to social media. In 2022, this culture will continue to be developed and carried forward, whether it is the updated iterations of electronic products or the memes in the respective social groups of the apps developed by users and creators. Emojis are more widely used among the new generation of social groups. Age is not an indicator of the extent of use, and this does not mean that the form applies only to the younger generation. People can use this form to make communication more expressive and emotional, but when separated by gender, there is a clear difference in usage between men and women; women seem to be more productive at this practical use. According to Chen, 4.01 billion messages from 130,000 active users in 183 countries were collected on the Android platform [7]. There are significant differences in the use of Emojis, in terms of choice, preference, and frequency between men and women. However, self-reported gender of both sexes may have contributed to the bias in the results. The apparent gap can still be inferred as the reason for the difference in usage. After researchers examined the relationship between gender and Emoji use, women were found to have an advantage when it comes to Emoji use [8]. Women are more likely to write about personal topics on social media, using pronouns, emotional words, interjections, and abbreviations, while men tend to write about philosophical topics, using standard dictionary words, proper nouns, numbers, technical words, and links. 29.2% of male users use Emojis in more than 5% of their messages, while the percentage of female users achieves 43.9%. In the chat environment, the expression and body language provide information in a blocked way, and the communication of speech has a kind of indirectness and ambiguity. Emojis can be used in a unique context to express meaning. The use of emoticons, even in contexts where they can be accurately conveyed and no ambiguity is possible, can create a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere in the chat environment.

Traditional alpha letters are no longer sufficient for today's rapid, visually oriented communication, so it is no surprise that graphic text like Emojis would fill the gap. The pace of society has accelerated, so people tend to replace long sentences with simple pictures. Emojis are often used to diffuse seriousness and create a relax atmosphere. In the coming years, Emojis should be used more widely and in more imaginative ways in all aspects of design. It has been likened to the cave paintings of the 21st century – a completely visual communication platform, especially for smartphones and tablets.

3. Social Media

There are similarities between different social media, but there are also some differences. This article focuses on WeChat, the most widely used social platform in China. In China, WeChat has greatly changed people's social lifestyle, and using WeChat has become an indispensable part of the daily life of most Chinese netizens. According to the data from Tencent in March 2018, WeChat has more than 1 billion daily active users worldwide [9]. According to a survey, about 25% of users open WeChat more than 30 times a day, and 55.2% of users use WeChat more than 10 times [10]. WeChat features two main functions: chat rooms and moments. In contrast, Twitter and Instagram

focus more on building shared communities. While Twitter and Instagram users can choose preferences that are visible only to their friends, these two platforms are more shareable, which increases users' desire to share. However, WeChat social community was established on the premise that communicators need to have a certain identity verification relationship. WeChat requires users to add friends and verify before they can send messages or check each other's moments. The difference between WeChat and Twitter and Instagram is the emphasis on media and society. Twitter and Instagram are essentially media tools with social functions; WeChat is essentially a social tool with some media functions. As media tools, Twitter and Instagram are mostly one-way communication. WeChat is a social tool and the relationship is built on the social relationship whose quality is a strong, mostly two-way relationship and it focuses on private content exchange and interaction. In this case, it is more possible to restore and analyze social scenes closer to life on WeChat. P Hua also pointed out in his analysis in 2016 that the communication between young people and their friends became the main motivation for using WeChat [11]. WeChat, as a media platform with strong social attributes, is also used with increasing frequency of Emojis, which proves that people gradually rely on the convenience and emotional richness brought by Emojis. In the future, social media will tend to meet people's needs and emotional needs. WeChat platform is taken as the research object. As an effective way for social media users to express their emotions, Emojis gradually tend to meet people's more delicate and diverse emotions.

4. Emojis on WeChat

WeChat's unique style of Emojis also became a reason for people to use WeChat more. Previously, the WeChat platform added new Emojis in the latest version 8.0 update. To enrich the way users express themselves on WeChat, WeChat 8.0 has upgraded Emojis.

According to the pictures provided, most of the Emojis appear as yellow faces which are also at the top of every platform's Emoji list. Emojis are managed by the Unicode Consortium, which only gives a black and white prototype. When new Emojis appear, the platforms decide what color to render. As for why platforms choose yellow, the most classic smiley face is considered here. American commercial artist Harvey Ball first created a design named Worcester Smiley in 1963. The trend spread all over the world and even became one of the iconic logos of hippie culture, appearing on clothing, music albums, comics, and posters, as well as the symbol of "World Smile Day". The bright yellow color above is chosen to better display the details of the Emojis. Yellow is a color that evokes a sense of warm hope. It is neutral, but it is also very striking. With the expansion of Emojis in recent years, Emojis are no longer limited to representing facial expressions, but food, animals, plants, and all kinds of things that can be visualized through Emojis. Among the 119 exclusive Emojis on WeChat, 85 facial expressions take up 71.4 percent of the total. The WeChat platform focuses more on Smileys and emotional Emojis than the thousands of basic Emojis on the market.

The general classification of Emojis' yellow faces can be divided into positive type, neutral type, and negative type [12]. Although Emoji expressions and gestures have higher emotional significance than simple positive/negative expressions, emotions can generally be subdivided into six types: love, happiness, surprise, anger, sadness, and fear [13]. These sentiment analyses, which go beyond positive and negative views, can no longer be subdivided into neutral Emojis. In this paper, the positive and negative values of emotion analysis are used to count the expressions in WeChat system. Among the 85 extended Emojis, the neutral type of Emojis accounted for a high proportion of 69.4%. This also reflects that in contemporary online communication, people tend to express their emotions in a diversified way. People no longer use the obvious positive and negative types of Emojis but neutral Emojis which are more suitable for expressing delicate emotions.

Emojis are the most basic and ultimate form of visual communication, which can also be understood as a visual communication tool. Small and detailed in size, Emojis can be used anywhere, conveying a message that most users can guess and understand based on a limited number of elements. The basic reason is that people express themselves by drawing and doodling before they learn to read and write. The design concept of Emojis is largely derived from and depends on people's instincts of communication and expression. Instead of using them individually, they can be combined like building blocks to create longer expressions. The WeChat platform offers Emojis that extend this "combination" concept. When a user sends or receives a single emoticon in a chat, the animation will be played, and even some emoticon animations can be played on full screen. For example, when the user sends the "bomb" Emojis, the screen displays an animation of the bomb, while the "sigh" Emoji shows the gas coming out of the mouth. Later, smaller versions of the update further promoted the combined Emojis effect. When people use more than one Emoji, they will directly trigger the hidden egg set by the system. Even when a specific language is used, the system will automatically associate the animated effects of the Emojis to create an atmosphere.

On January 9, 2019, Tencent released big data on Emojis that users of all ages like to use on WeChat [9]. The "strong" Emoji is the most popular among more than 55 percent of the population; the generation after the 70s most likes "sneer"; the generation after 80s likes "bared teeth"; the generation after the 90s likes "smile through tears"; the favorite of the generation after the 00s' is "facepalm". In the Chinese context, emoticons often have different meanings in different situations, and the same goes for Emojis. The reason why people have different understandings of the meaning of an Emoji is that the same Emoji is displayed differently on different mobile platforms [14]. Even in the face of the same expression, people's feelings are quite different. The "smile" Emoji is an expression that makes the post-90s, the post-00s, and most of the post-80s generation slightly uncomfortable. It has long since changed from a simple "smile" to a synonym for "hehe" or "helpless" and when people mistakenly send the wrong Emojis, it can cause embarrassment for both the sender and the recipient. Embarrassment will bring bad consequences, so it is necessary to eliminate embarrassment in social media communication. This not only enhances the interaction between users but also makes users willing to continue using the social platform. Different platforms have different design languages and directions for Emojis, and there will be some errors in the presentation of settings between different systems. In this case, a good Emoji should avoid as many errors in understanding as possible. Having stronger commonality can help people save communication costs and time and create a better social environment.

5. Conclusion

Emojis provide a new way of communication for users of the rapidly developing Internet. This way helps people meet their unique emotional expression needs with more rapid visual communication effects. It provides a language style with low barriers for people of all cultural backgrounds. As a representative of social media platform in China, WeChat has attracted the attention of local young people with its distinctive design style and animation effect in the use of Emojis. Since WeChat itself officially does not provide more introduction to Emojis affiliated with the platform, there is more room for thinking. However, there is still a large room for research on the differences in Emojis between different platforms, which will help people better understand excellent visual communication effects and emotional delivery methods. Future research will help people better design Emojis that can cross the barrier of culture so that people can communicate and express themselves at a lower cost. As a communication aid, it is inevitable that Emojis tend to be diverse, rich, and interesting. The text sequence in online communication is equivalent to the spoken language in real communication, and the function of network emoticons corresponds to the

situational language in real communication. It makes online chat not only as convenient and intuitive as face-to-face meeting but also more vivid than face-to-face chat. If the use of words and some special or special symbols is a sign of a major stage in the progress of human civilization, then there is a return to modern times, that is, to the situation of image culture in the pre-literary era. The deep essence of editorialization is the conceptualization of information expression and reception. These graphic expressions, which have their charm, require deeper thinking from human society.

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