Examine the Widespread of Internet Slang "EMO": The Role of Social Media in Dissemination of Negative Emotions

Haihui Chen[1,a,*], Qiantong Chen[2,b], Xilin Yang[3,c], Jiawei Weng[4,d]

[1]*Shanghai Pinghe School, Shanghai, 201206, China*
[2]*King's College London, London, WC2R 2LS, England, United Kingdom*
[3]*Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, 15213, United States*
[4]*Shanghai Northcross School, Shanghai, 200940, China*
a. chenhaihui@shphschool.com, b. reakyxhen@gmail.com,c. hharperyang@gmail.com,
d. iivanaweng@gmail.com
*corresponding author

Abstract: EMO is an emerging and popular internet slang that refers to a negative emotional state. Via content analysis and interview, various perception toward EMO was found in this work. The fundamental motivation to use EMO includes the crowd mentality on social media and its linguistic functions. The application of EMO varies by the social media affordances, such as editability, visibility, and identifiability, and is supported by individuals' personal preference for expression and psychological purpose of self-disclosure. Nevertheless, some users refuse to use EMO to express their emotions. The abuse of EMO is perceived as a "dilution" of emotions. Despite different perceptions of EMO, individuals share the consensus that EMO effectively facilitates interpersonal communication as an internet slang, but it is insufficient to dissipate one's negative emotions. However, the massive application of EMO reflected an increase in the public's acceptance and respect toward negativities. Verbalizing and externalizing emotion discharge the unpleasant unconscious feelings silently modifying the emotional well beings of teenagers.

Keywords: Internet slang, Negative emotions, Communication, Self-disclosure.

1. Introduction

With the application of the internet slang "EMO" during the long-lasting period, the sharing of negative emotions is becoming especially noticeable in the Chinese social media landscape today. EMO is an emerging and popular internet slang that refers to a negative emotional state, but it originally refers to a type of music. The present study seek to trace back the evolution of EMO and its role in the dissemination of negative emotions, to evaluate the self-disclosure of negative emotions among the young generation [1].

The previous study Generation Ku by Robert L. Moore analyzed several slangs, such as Ku, Niubi, and Shuang, as "a representative of the young generation's self-indulgence that does not match with the mainstream", and explored the rebellious shift in value among the Chinese young generation [2]. However, the present study is more inclined to understand individuals' diverse, detailed psychological incentives behind. Meanwhile, the phenomenon of disclosing individual negativities on social media contradicts the previous social comparison theory [3]. Some young

audiences are now no longer determining their social worth based on how they differ from others but show their existence by admitting the harmony of depression.

Considering its potential impacts on the Z generation, the researchers focus on teenagers' psychological reasons behind the broad use of EMO, and the dissemination of negative emotions. Along with the investigation of the contemporary revealing of negative emotions with frequent usage of the slang EMO on the Chinese social media landscape, the present study recognizes the linguistic essence of EMO by exploring its evolution of application over time, the reasons contributed to EMO's popularity in adolescent communication, and how does the disclosure impact the generation's psychological well-being.

2. Methodology

2.1. Linguistic Analysis

In investigating the corpus of EMO, the study applied a web crawler to carry out the growing of the emo's definition and its application in different sentences. The leading social media platforms the study focused on are Weibo and Wechat moments, in search of the keyword 'EMO' and investigating how people use it. After tracking and locating the buzzword, the findings were categorized into year order from 2017 to 2020, demonstrating the popularization of EMO. The main objectives reached are:

- The origin of EMO
- The exact time when people started to pose EMO on the social media platform
- The time when EMO gains popularity
- The lexical context

2.2. In-depth Interview

After confirming the origin of the internet slang and the reason behind its popularity, 20 interviewees, all of whom are within the same peer group aged 16-20 years old were interviewed. The gender is separated into 10 males and 10 females. The in-depth interviews are approximately 30 minutes in total for each interviewee.

The interviews are separated into three sections. The main focuses include the interviewees' application and motivation of 'Emo', its relationship with negative emotion, and their overall perception of emotional expression. Descriptive and prescriptive questions were separated to better understand the interviewees' thoughts, as categorized below.

2.2.1. Application & Motivation of 'Emo'

In this section, authentic detailed examples and context are provided to investigate the interviewees' basic application of the word 'Emo' and their motivation. For example:

- **Descriptive**
  - When did you start using the word Emo?
  - When did you start using the word Emo?
  - When using the word 'Emo', what is your emotional context?
- **Prescriptive**
  - What is your first impression of people starting to use the word 'Emo'?
  - What do you think are your reasons for using many of the slangs that express negative emotions?
  - Do you seek any emotional intake when using the word Emo?

2.2.2. Relationship with negative emotion

In this section, interviewees' relationship with negative emotion both through their perspective and bystander perspective was collected, as well as the difference in emotional expression online and offline. Researchers also further dive into interviewees' perception of emotional expression capabilities, thus asking whether or not there is a cause-and-effect relationship between the emotional expression abilities and the emergence of the word EMO itself. For example:

- **Descriptive**
  - Do you express negative emotions frequently on the Internet?
  - How do you express negative emotions online?
  - After seeing someone expresses 'emo', what actions do you take (comfort, agree, hard to empathize)?
- **Prescriptive**
  - Why/Why not do you frequently express negative emotions on the Internet?
  - How do you think this has affected your negative emotions?

3. Findings

3.1. Evolution of 'Emo'

EMO is originated from the word 'EMOcore,' in the 80s of Washington, which stands for "Emotional Hardcore" that first recorded by the Thrasher magazine in 1986. This music style is a branch of Hardcore Punk music style invented by the band Rites of Spring in late 1983. Through the advanced search on Weibo from 2017.1.1 to 2021.09.01, the researchers tracked the transition of EMO from the term belongs to the subcultural minority to public prevalence. The theory of Speech Chains states that through the process of interaction with others in SNSs, semiotic and social values of a particular language are transmitted and changed [4]. In the case of EMO, two out of twenty interviewees stated that they'd known the word EMO for the very first time in 2017, as a type of music. On Weibo, there is a minimum number of posts mentioning EMO. In the December of 2019, along with the occurrence of the homophonic slang "WangYiYun", which stands for depressing music and empathetic comments on the Chinese music APP "NetEase Cloud Music", Chinese netizens have gradually given new meaning to the term. Nowadays, EMO is widely regarded as the abbreviation of "emotional" and used as a word describing negative emotion.

3.2. The Role of EMO in Dissemination of Negative Emotions

The internet slang "EMO" is a general and informal expression of negative emotions. It's applicated as a verb. For example, "I EMOed." or "I am EMO." (我 EMO 了) It is both actively used verbally and online.

The primary motivation to use "EMO" is crowd mentality, which is described as following the suit. The linguistic features of EMO also promote the usage of EMO. First, EMO is described as a carrier of negativities. The word acts as an emotional export when users are expressing emotions. The strong generality of EMO makes it suitable for a wide range of emotions, such as anxiety, depression, stress, etc. The complex emotions are simplified with the word EMO. Additionally, EMO is easy to pronounce and type.

In self-disclosure and communication, EMO is a word with high intelligibility, which helps others to understand and promote communication. It also softens the meaning of language. Compared to formal words like anxious, depressive, and stressful, EMO sounds less serious and

avoids transferring negativity to others. It also gives the listeners a sense of affinity and passion, which makes them more comfortable and willing to listen.

The reason for refusing to use EMO includes: first, individualized people are not willing to follow the suit. Secondly, some people perceive EMO as an inaccurate expression. They claim that EMO with generality cannot accurately describe a specific emotion, which blurs the message of expression. Internet slang is also regarded as an entertainment medium not serious enough, and the wide dissemination of EMO might lead to indifference toward negative emotions. Thirdly, the superficial description is regarded as a diluted expression of emotions, which leads to semantic degradation and undermines people's ability to perceive emotions.

3.3. Self-Disclosure of Negative Emotions on Social Media

Participants' descriptions and perceptions of expressing negativity online depend on several factors. For example, some participants tend to send private messages to close friends and seek responses, while others prefer to post the negativities secretly on a "burner account." Accordingly, their perception of the effectiveness of self-disclosure changes as the expression channel on social media changes.

3.3.1. Private Messages

Some participants believe that establishing a dyadic dynamic free of discomfort in private messages is key to an effective and healthy exchange. However, the others claim that the lack of facial expression diminishes the understanding between each other and does not help regulate negativities. One female participant added that "It is very troublesome for others to listen to your complaints and try their best to think of an appropriate response to you."

3.3.2. Public Posts

On the other hand, some participants prefer sharing their emotions with the public. Supporters believe a public account is an open platform for acquaintances to encourage each other. They are willing to share and look forward to caring and replies from others. However, some participants described an awkward and conflicted situation of "deleting in seconds". A female participant said: *"I rarely post EMO content in my WeChat Moments, and if I do, I delete it immediately; But I'll leave them in the WeiBo, because WeChat Moments is full of people I know, while my Weibo is almost not read. "* Moreover, another female participant recalled that she was irritated when her Weibo account was accidentally discovered by acquaintances. Then she "*emptied all the followers and change all of her profile info."* Opinions from other participants slightly reveal the reason behind the situation. A female claims that she rarely posts EMO content to protect her positive image, and a male explained that he feels uncomfortable when realizing his *"posts always remain on the Internet, and others can look it up at any time."*

3.3.3. Responses Received from Self-disclosure

Interviewees described the responses as likes, comments, emojis, private messages, and, surprisingly, mocking. Their perceptions of the responses vary on their intentions of self-disclosure.

People with intentions of receiving responses feel "warm and comforted", believing the supports from peers help regulate emotions. However, others without intentions of receiving responses feel "embarrassed and regretful to post the contents". They describe the WeChat Moment as an "emotion trash bin". They are not asking for any responses when they posts. One male participant even argues that comforting words online are just "social formulas".

4. Discussion

4.1. Dyadic Disclosure

Walther defines editability as the quality of being able to spend a lot of time crafting and recrafting a communicative act before it is viewed by others [5]. Dennis, Fuller, and Valacich describe a similar affordance, rehearsability, that they assert enables a sender to compose a message with the exact meaning that he or she intends [6]. Senders' wording and style of their messages depend on the form of self-disclosure and the purpose of expression [7]. Two categories of self-disclosure are dyadic disclosure and broadcasting disclosure [8].

People are engaging in a dyadic disclosure when they are sending private messages to acquaintances. Some people believe establishing a dyadic dynamic with an object to talk with is key to an effective and healthy disclosure of negative emotions online. Therefore, "Expression effectiveness" is particularly important in the context of dyadic disclosure. In order to let the receiver understand, senders edit their messages to be as "narrative" as possible, which means to describe the cause and effect of events in detail.

However, according to our results, people proposed different perceptions about the relationship between social media and "being understood". Some people believe that "without face-to-face conditions", people will be more relaxed and can better express their emotions, while others claim that there is a lack of non-verbal cues on social media [9]. Senders might fail to convey their message or even be misunderstood by receivers because the text is too insufficient to accurately describe the mood. Either situation undermines the effectiveness of regulating negative emotions". Besides, people who consider the feelings of others don't want to transmit negativity. Thus, while some people believe that the main purpose of Dyadic Disclosure is "to get a touching, useful, and high-quality response," others believe that the purpose of confiding communication is "self-deprecating": all they want is a person who can listen to all the things hidden in their inner heart, but no responses are necessarily required. In addition, due to the constraints mentioned above, some people are not inclined to express their negative emotions by sharing with others, instead, they choose broadcasting disclosure.

4.2. Broadcasting Disclosure: Private Account and Public Account

The nature of private accounts and public accounts contribute to people's various descriptions and perceptions of self-disclosure when they engage in broadcasting disclosure on social media. Normally, people attach more importance to "describing the emotions" rather than "telling the story and seeking understanding" when there is no subject to talk with. This is indicated by the transition of people's presentation from "Narrative" (recounting the story) to "Lyric" (expressing the emotions).

As mentioned in *3.3.2 public posts,* a female interviewee clarifies the significant differences between public accounts and private accounts when she posts EMO contents.

Therefore, the concept of Visibility needs to be introduced to understand public and private accounts. Bregman and Haythornthwaite note that visibility "refers to the means, methods, and opportunities for presentation; in our usage, it primarily addresses the speakers' concerns with the presentation of self" [10]. Given the fact that anyone can see what's posted on the public accounts, including family members, close friends, and even strangers, while only acquaintances have the access to private accounts. Therefore, typically, public accounts are described as highly visible, while private accounts are less visible. However, the result of our interview contradicted common sense: the visibility of public accounts is lower than the one of private accounts.

In most Internet applications, senders are in charge of deciding how much anonymity they wish to maintain or if they wish to be personally identified [11]. The visibility of public accounts largely depends on whether the person is willing to disclose the account and share it with acquaintances. When a person refuses to open public accounts, the account is like a grain of sand among the enormous recommendation system. Only a minimal percentage of people see what the account posts. Alternatively, since strangers' replies seem less important than those of acquaintances, people don't pay much attention to the comments on public accounts. By contrast, the posts on private accounts are available to most of the common, and their replies could largely affect the senders' emotional states. The research found that most of the participants use WeChat as their private and main account, and some of them have an undisclosed public Weibo account, a burner account.

In the public account, participants perceive that they do not need impression management or consideration for others' feelings under the fact that no acquaintances can read the public account. As a result, participants don't pay too much attention to the language used and use whatever word comes to mind. Therefore, when the visibility of social accounts is low, self-disclosure tends to be free, open, strong, and illogical. Moreover, since they default to being neglected by acquaintances, they post negative emotions without the intention of receiving responses. If someone does respond unexpectedly, they will feel more uncomfortable, making self-disclosure of negative emotions counterproductive.

In the private accounts, first, participants think about the images presented. They limit the amount of negative content based on the image they present to acquaintances and avoid spreading negativities to others. Moreover, participants pointed out the enduring retrievable character of the Internet: the content published will remain online and be seen by others [12]. Communication is persistent if it remains accessible in the same form as the original display after the actor has finished his or her presentation [10]. This affordance of persistence has also been referred to as "reviewability", "recordability", or "permanence" [13-15]. Therefore, participants feel uncomfortable and want to delete the posts.

Reactions towards receiving responses differ depending on the senders' intentions. If the participants believed that others' responses helped regulate negative emotions, they felt warm and comforted when they received likes, comments, and messages that helped them digest their emotions. However, since there is only a limited number of people who care about the posts, the lack of interaction directedness in broadcasting enables receivers to choose between responding to it and ignoring it. Therefore, some people will be even more frustrated after their self-disclosure, because, only a few people reply. On the contrary, some people see posts as an "emotional trash bin" and perceive words of comfort as a "social formula". Therefore, comfort is useless because participants do not ask for it. Or, after receiving a response, they may feel embarrassed and regret posting it, feeling ashamed and regretful.

5. Limitation

It is recognized there are a few limitations during the research progress of our study. Firstly, we lack the questions about individuals' sociocultural backgrounds and the further discussion of specific perceptions. Also, as mentioned, the interview sample size of 20 youths aged from 16 to 20 is not a very expectable size to draw any further firm conclusions. Secondly, our study stays in the stage of investigating and discussing the cause and phenomena of emotional expression through internet communication, with no further anticipation. If plausible, future studies will be interested in focusing on how to make internet communication better, since this has been the largest gap and topic to be discussed. Lastly, the present study is only suggestive, but not conclusive. Due to the limited sample size, limited method of collecting the data source, as well as limited theories to back up the findings, diverse conditions are still waiting to be discussed and amended.

6.   Conclusion

Slangs are symbols for a cohort that seeks to define young generations' identity. As social media are becoming the most extensive reading and outputting spaces for generation Z, teenagers obtain their stable identity on the internet along the process of their personality maturation. By showing their more diversified emotions and interacting with the world, teenagers build their identity with inquiries about themselves and impressions about themselves from others. In other words, teenagers gain a clear idea of who they are.

According to the content analysis and interview, there are various perceptions behind the emerging internet slang EMO. The fundamental motivation to use EMO includes the crowd mentality on social media and its linguistic functions. The application of EMO varies by the social media affordances, such as editability, visibility, and identifiability, and is supported by individuals' personal preference for expression and psychological purpose of self-disclosure. Nevertheless, instead of passively adapting every piece of information on social media, some users refuse to use EMO to express their emotions. The abuse of EMO is perceived as a "dilution" of emotions. Individuals indicated their subjective initiatives toward the trend on social media.

Despite the different perceptions of EMO, individuals share the consensus that EMO is a carrier of emotions without a significant effect on regulating emotions. Therefore, although its comprehensibility and reproducibility facilitate interpersonal communication as an internet slang, it is insufficient to dissipate one's negative emotions from the perspective of emotional regulation, since it cannot satisfy the needs underlying the emotions. However, giving a glimpse of the massive application of EMO, people are more willing to express their personal feelings in an introverted society. More and more negativities are being accepted and respected. Verbalizing and externalizing emotion discharge the unpleasant unconscious feelings silently modifying the emotional well beings of teenagers.

Acknowledgment

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