



# Research on Emoticon Art in Online Media: Emotional Expression and Social Functions

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**Abstract.** As a nascent network symbol, emoticons have achieved considerable popularity among netizens. As a symbolic expression system created and used by netizens in the Internet era, emoticons have contributed to the diversification of people's emotional expression, and are characterised by visualisation, ease of replication, rapid dissemination and broad acceptance. However, the use of emoticons has highlighted a number of issues that arise when they are employed in communication. This paper examines the significance and role of contemporary emoticons in interpersonal communication, considering their conceptualisation, their evolution, psychological research and analysis of their advantages and disadvantages. It is hoped that this analysis will encourage a rational approach to the prevalence of emoticons and encourage individuals to play their part in maintaining a clean and positive network environment.

**Keywords:** Internet era; network symbols; psychology; emoticons; emotional expression

## 1 Introduction

In recent years, with the rapid development of information science and technology, the way of communication between people is gradually becoming diversified. From interpersonal communication to mass communication, from face-to-face communication to online communication, our values, living patterns, behavioural habits and ways of thinking have undergone radical changes. Nowadays, all kinds of social media are booming, and a new form of interaction - network emoticons - has gradually emerged on the Internet. As a kind of network symbols, emoticons have profoundly influenced people's way of communication, and the dissemination of information between people has not only been limited to the conveyance of words, but has become more figurative and specialised. This emoji craze is inextricably linked to people's emotional expression in the network era.

## 2 Overview of network emoticons

Emojis represent thoughts and feelings through facial expressions and posture, constituting a significant mode of non-verbal communication. In face-to-face communication<sup>1</sup>, the facial expression of the human face serves as an important means of expression, conveying emotions, inner language, and attitudes. In the contemporary, fast-paced Internet era, individuals are often preoccupied with work-related tasks, limiting their opportunities for face-to-face communication. Consequently, this communication is frequently transformed into online text-based interactions. While the convenience of online communication is appreciated, concerns have been raised about the potential for misunderstandings and conflicts arising from the occasional use of poorly expressed words. At this juncture, a phenomenon emerged wherein individuals sought to replace their own facial expressions and body gestures with a set of intuitive symbols. This need for a more convenient and immediate means of emotional expression led to the advent of emoticons<sup>2</sup>.

The concept of emoticons was initially proposed by Professor Furman of Carnegie Mellon University in 1982<sup>3</sup>. Subsequently, following a period of continuous design and modification, the types and styles of emoticons underwent a process of diversification. In essence, emoticons represent a form of visual communication employed in online contexts, wherein images are utilized to convey emotional states. In particular, in the context of the vast array of social media platforms that have emerged in recent times, emoticons have become an integral component of online communication, facilitating the expression of emotions among a vast majority of users. The application of network emoticons is extremely wide-ranging. This unique visual design carrier has not only existed in chat software such as WeChat and QQ, but has also been widely used in social platforms such as Jitterbug, Shutterbug, Weibo, and blogs. As a novel aesthetic phenomenon, emoticons are transforming the manner in which individuals interact with one another, contingent upon the ongoing evolution of the Internet. From the earliest examples of face characters and simple symbols to the subsequent introduction of the classic yellow-faced emoji, and now to the multitude of homemade emoji that have emerged in recent times.

## 3 The iteration and design principle of network emoticons

Regarding the renewal and iteration of network emoticons, it is summarised in the following stages:

### 3.1 The era of simple characters of ‘Yanwen’

Before the birth of emoticons, people often used character symbols to communicate. The earliest human character emoticon was firstly proposed by Professor Scott Fahlman in 1982, who used :- ) to indicate the meaning of smile, which also opened up the precedent of symbolic emoticon. ASCII characters are simply composed of some punctuation marks, numbers and letters, which are used to simulate the state of the

human face, thus reflecting the character's inner emotion. The curvature of the brackets is used to represent the curved shape of the corners of a person's mouth, and the two dots of the colon are used to refer to a person's eyes, which is both simpler and more vivid than plain text. For example: :-(for displeasure, :-O for surprise, :-P for naughty tongue out, etc. All of these simple symbols abstractly simulate the expressions that people make when they are engaged in emotional expression. However, at this stage, the symbols were horizontal and it was difficult to read them accurately.

As the character symbols were introduced to Japan, the creators reinvented and refined them, adjusting the angle of the expressions and adding more complex punctuation marks, so that the characters were not only limited to showing the state of a person's face, but also added body language to make the arms of the symbols 'move', making them visually more consistent and more aesthetically pleasing and easier to understand. more beautiful and easy to understand. For example: (ノ ￣ ￣ ￣ ￣)ノ for anger, ε( ￣ ￣ ￣ ￣)3 for weeping. This is what we call 'face writing.'

### 3.2 The birth of 'emoji' basic icons

The advent of the Internet has rendered the use of simple 'character symbols' inadequate for expressing emotions in communication. Consequently, numerous social media and communication systems have sought to develop a pictographic representation that more accurately reflects the emotional state of the communicator. This led to the emergence of the 'emoji'. The earliest emoji is the 'little yellow face'. This emoji is also known as the 'painted text'. In comparison to pigmented text, the painted text has a richer contrast of colours and more beautiful lines. This makes it more visually appealing, but also more intuitive to perceive the subjective emotions of the communicator. Furthermore, it is more intuitive to the subjective emotions of the communicator. Additionally, the combination of colours and emotions is effectively conveyed. For instance, the face turns red when angry, the cheeks redden when shy, and so forth, which closely resembles the characteristics of the human face. Consequently, emoji have gained immense popularity across the globe.

### 3.3 The transformation of 'emoji' to emoticons

Along with the development of computer technology and the popularity of mapping software, there began to be spontaneous production of vivid and interesting emoticons by Internet users<sup>4</sup>. The emergence of dynamic emoticons originated from the 'Bunny Ski' series of moving pictures produced by Wang Maomao of the Communication University of China in 2006, and since then emoticons can not only represent the 'fixed' emotions at a certain moment. After adding body movements, the whole emoticon looks more real and dynamic, making the network emotion 'alive'. In the creation of the vast number of netizens, these emoticons have broken through the early limitations of the human face expression-based, with a stronger narrative and emotional infectivity. Some emoticon makers are not satisfied with the emotional expression of facial expressions alone, and they begin to cooperate with a variety of gestures, body movements, and characters wearing, which strengthens the accuracy and intuition of

emotional expression. For example, WeChat's 'Blu and its friends' series of emoticons have gradually become popular and widely circulated. With the development of film and television dramas, people began to intercept the clips, plus text interpretation for secondary creation. Gradually, a wave of emoji creation has started on the internet.

Emoji packs are subject to rapid updates, with each generation reflecting the latest developments in the times. The analysis of emotions conveyed by emoticons is becoming increasingly precise as designers continue to refine their understanding of the nuances of human expression. When designers create emoticons, they initially focus on the underlying emotional essence conveyed by these symbols. They consider how to align them more closely with the genuine emotions of humans and how to enhance their utility in facilitating emotional expression in communication. This process is not merely a matter of pictorial design; it also entails a great deal of learning in the field of human emotion research.

#### **4 The significance of emotional expression of emoticons and psychological research**

'Network emoticons as a carrier of information, the information it conveys belongs to a particular environment within a particular environment, each emoticon encompasses and conveys the content of a particular environment is related to a particular person, and at the same time, people will be based on the environment in which they are to network emoticons to a message to receive or not, when the contact with network emoticons carry the content of the information that is related to the environment that the person is in environment is relevant will be received <sup>5</sup>.'

From a psychological perspective, individuals exhibit a selective tendency in the reception of information, demonstrating a proclivity to assimilate data that aligns with their personal experiences, values, and other intrinsic factors. To illustrate, Wang Yi's 'Foreign Minister Emoticons' series comprises a set of emoticons conveying information pertaining to politics. Through interviews, it was determined that the majority of the audience who expressed positive sentiments towards this series of emojis were national public officials, including state civil servants and members of the People's Police, due to the close relevance of this type of information to their roles and responsibilities. Consequently, it was perceived as more accessible and acceptable to this demographic. It can be seen, therefore, that different types of emoticons are not equally suited to the same audience, and that the degree of acceptance of the emotions conveyed is also highly variable. In the context of communication, the ability to select the appropriate target for a given message is a crucial skill.

#### **5 Pros and cons of emoticons to convey emotions**

To a certain extent, the emergence of emoticons promotes the expression of our emotions, making it possible to reduce emotional loss in the process of communication and bring the distance between the transmitter and the recipient closer, but the use of in-

appropriate emoticons in some inappropriate occasions or due to individual differences in understanding, age generation gap and other factors are likely to lead to serious bias in transmitting the information, and even produce misunderstanding and contradiction. Therefore, the use of emoticons has a double-sided impact on our communication.

## **5.1 Positive effects of emoticons' emotional expression**

### **5.1.1 Enhancing emotional perception.**

The composition of emoticons is very simple, usually picture symbols, and some emoticons will explain the meaning of the things in the picture with a short text. Often when we communicate and interact with others, some immediate emotions are difficult to describe directly in words, using the exaggerated features of emoticons can amplify our emotions, enhance the impact of emotions on the recipient, so that they feel our clear attitude and position. Nowadays, sometimes we may need visual communication more than words and phrases. For example, when a friend shares some unbelievable news with you, we need to respond to their emotional interaction, at this time, a recently popular exaggerated piggy bank 'open mouth' emoticon seems to be a more direct hit than the words 'can't believe'. The heart of some.

### **5.1.2 Reduce unnecessary emotional consumption.**

On the other hand, today's era of information redundancy, mobile phone social media often recovered a lot of boring and worthless information, which will inevitably consume a lot of energy when dealing with them. Emojis with human characteristics, with its concise expression but rich in meaning, so that both parties in the dialogue do not need to spend too much energy on interpreting the text, and no longer need to think carefully about whether there is a deeper meaning behind the text <sup>6</sup>. Nowadays, the emoji libraries of various social platforms are getting richer and richer, which don't need us to think too much and consume our thoughts internally, but only need a gentle touch between our fingertips and the screen to express the meaning very clearly. Saving time and effort, emoticons are indeed a necessity for young people to communicate quickly in the context of contemporary fast-paced life.

### **5.1.3 Promote emotional expression.**

At the same time, the appropriate use of emoticons can avoid the communication of pure text boring and embarrassing, for example, in the two people who have just been acquainted with a short period of time to communicate, it is inevitable that they will not be able to find the topic, worried about their own emotional expression is not in place so as to make the other party misunderstanding, destroy the good image of their own in the minds of others and other concerns. Including some emoticons in the text can make the chatting atmosphere seem more intimate, and make two people get a 'shared' emotional space. Emoticons can make the receiver of the message get into the emotional space of the sender much faster than text, infecting the receiver, thus arousing emotional resonance and pulling people closer to each other. Not only that, a lot of difficult to name the emotion can also be entrusted to the emoticon to support the expression.

## **5.2 Problems of Emoticon Emotional Expression**

### **5.2.1 Degradation of language expression ability.**

The use of emoticons facilitates our daily communication, and with the passage of time, the frequency of using emoticons in our daily communication is also increasing. When we as communicators comment on a matter and express our own attitudes, opinions and positions, most of the time we can find a suitable 'Internet face' as the carrier of our emotional output. So people often choose to express their emotions in the form of emoticons instead of lengthy text descriptions, but this long-term 'avoidance' of the output of verbal symbols is likely to weaken our ability to express ourselves verbally. Marx believed that alienation is the subject in the labour practice to transform the object, create the object, the object produced by its own activities become external forces, in turn, enslave, dominate and drive the subject itself<sup>7</sup>. The original intention of the existence of emoticons is to fill the gap of people's non-verbal expression, but if we rely too much on the use of this symbolic language, emoticons are likely to turn into an anti-objective dominant force that dominates people's emotional output.

### **5.2.2 Conveying ambiguous meanings and leading people to misunderstandings.**

Although emoticons simulate human body language and facial gestures, greatly reducing the attrition of emotional conveyance errors in written language, in fact, the emotions conveyed through emoticons may also appear to be greatly deviated. This stems from the cognitive bias between people. Different people facing the same picture symbols may not have the same understanding, this understanding may even be the opposite. At this time, if you can not carry out timely communication and exchange, both sides of the conversation are not even interpreted to the effective information, it is likely to cause conflicts. For example: the simplest emoji: yellow face smiley emoji, in the official interpretation of the meaning of 'smile', which refers to the meaning of happy and friendly, many elders also like to send this emoji to express greetings and politeness, is a kind of positive emotions on behalf of. However, with the development of the times, it has been given a lot of other meanings, and many netizens see the lower part of the 'smile' in this emoji as a normal smile after inhibition, which is in line with the mouth expression of a smile. However, the lack of contraction of the orbicularis oculi muscle in the upper part of the smile, accompanied by a downward shift of the line of sight, suggests that the smile is not only a fake smile, but also maps out a negative state of mind, which is a kind of mockery that does not want to pay any attention to the other party and is disdainful of the other party. A large amount of information content in social media comes from humanities, music videos and various thematic pictures, which makes it difficult for users to have a correct judgement of the hidden meaning and emotional connotations behind these symbols, thus forming information barriers<sup>8</sup>.

### **5.2.3 Frequent occurrence of vulgarity and infringement of copyright.**

With the development of p-graphics technology and the emergence of various software for making emoticons, many human cousin symbols have appeared to be

abused. Many social media people in order to attract attention, attract traffic, the original emoticons for malicious p picture and AI face swap, deviating from the meaning and design of the emoticon itself, and let it circulate widely on the network, corrupting the clean and positive network environment. Some netizens only for the pursuit of their own interests and spread a lot of vulgar, pornographic emoticons, misleading the values of immature young netizens. Contemporary network emoji infringement phenomenon is not uncommon. Many people take photos of passers-by and make them into emoticons with the words they want to express, and use them to vent their emotions on social media, which infringes on the portrait rights of the people in the photos. Article 1018 of the Civil Code states that the right to portrait is the unique right of a natural person to make, use, disclose or licence his/her own portrait in accordance with the provisions of the law <sup>9</sup>. Without the permission of others to create some against their will emoticons for dissemination, is an offence. Therefore, emoticons should not be abused, and the use of emoticons should be well controlled, and should not exceed the legal and moral bottom line.

## 6 Conclusion

The popularity and development of emoticons have enriched people's ways to express their emotions, stimulated people's desire to express themselves, and brought people a different emotional experience visually. However, while emoticons facilitate communication, some problems have also been exposed: the popularity of vulgar spoof emoticons spreads a negative emotion to netizens, and at the same time, it is not conducive to guiding the values of netizens; the quality of netizens is uneven, and they wantonly express their personalities on the Internet, which harms the feelings of other recipients of information; emoticon creators have a weak sense of law, and infringement phenomenon occurs frequently; the enhancement of emotional expression of the symbols of pictures weakens the ability of normal human verbal communication; and the development of emoticons is also very important. At the same time, it weakens the normal speech communication ability of human beings. .... In summary, we should rationally look at the prevalence of emoticons, regulate the use of network emoticons, and strengthen the supervision of platforms and netizens, so that everyone's favourite 'Internet Face Replacement' can really play a positive role in serving people's emotional expression and serve the interests of people. to serve people's emotional expression.

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