The Positive and Negative Functions of Emoticons

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Abstract

The term "emoticon", short for "emotion icons", has long drawn a lot of attention in computer-mediated communication. In order to obtain an overview of emoticons and clear the further study direction, the present thesis summarizes the functions of emoticons and the disadvantages if people abuse them. Generally speaking, emoticons make contributions to the context in text-based communication so that the recipients can understand the senders. Specifically speaking, emoticons have many functions in some professional fields like linguistic field, marketing management field, education, etc.. Meanwhile, if emoticons are abused, there will be a series of problems in interaction, society and spirit.

Key words: Emoticons; Emoji; Functions; Disadvantages

INTRODUCTION

Computer-mediated Communication (CMC) has been highly pervasive in our daily life. According to China Internet Network Information Center, the 43rd Statistical Report on the Development of Internet Network in China demonstrates that until December, 2018, the quantity of cyber citizen in China has been up to 829 million. Compared with 2017, the population increased by 3.8%. Moreover, the number of mobile phone netizens is 817 million ("The 43rd Statistical Report on the Development of Internet Network in China," August 28, 2019). Under such circumstances, information, communication and technologies largely affect the way people nowadays communicate. In fact, in the past decades, many available means of communication has sprung up such as Wechat, QQ, microblog, email, TikTok and even Zhihu (like Quaro), etc.. At the beginning of these applications' rise, interlocutors' communication online relied on text. Because the affective, nonverbal and social cues were absent, there were frequent poor communication outcomes (Walther, 1996; Walther & D'Addario, 2001). Just as president of Oxford Dictionaries Casper Grathwohl has ever said "You can see how traditional alphabet scripts have been struggling to meet the rapid-fire, visually focused demands of 21st century communication (Stav, November 16, 2015). And the media research scholar Graber Doris also mentions that the textual elements, which is advocated to transmit abstract meaning, begin to give way to reality and feeling based on image dissemination (Graber, 1988). Indeed, the Internet users overcome the potential limitations of textual elements. They use varieties of emotional cues, not only verbal (e.g., emotion words) but also paralinguistic cues included (Harris & Paradice, 2007; Luangrath, Peck, & Barger, 2017). One typical example of the latter is emoticons, for instance, the happy face in QQ. What's more, emoticons nowadays are very popular in CMC. Tencent announced the big data of QQ annual expression in 2018 – 0.9 billion QQ users have sent emoticons for 317.8 billion times during 2018 (U9.com, August 7, 2018).Therefore, just like Casper Grathwohl has ever claimed that emojis have been a part of communication. It's not surprising that a pictographic script like emoji

has stepped in to fill those gaps—it's flexible, immediate, and infuses tone beautifully. As a result, emojis are becoming an increasingly rich form of communication, one that transcends linguistic borders, they can serve as insightful windows through which to view our cultural preoccupations (Stav, November 16, 2015).

In fact, these emotion icons made their first appearance in CMC in 1982. It was a computer scientist at Carnegie Mellon University called Scott Fahlman who proposed the rotated smiley face :-) and the "frowny" face :-(to explain that something is a joke or not (Krohn, 2004). At the end of 1990s, Japanese Shigetaka Kurita created emoji (Liang, 2017) which is made up of the letters of various language (mainly Japanese) like o(*≧▽≦)ツ. In 2003 in China, the main social media QQ developed its first default expression – yellow round face while Renren put forward yellow square face. In 2007, in order to establish its mobile phones market in Japan, Apple updated iOS2.2 with the emoji menu into iPhones (Riordan, 2017). In 2008, an anonymous user published the rage comics produced by Microsoft Drawing Software. So fast did it spread that it stimulated the thriving of emoticons. To sum up, the development of emotional expressions is from American Standard Code for Information Interchange (ASCII), emoji to emoticons.

It can be seen that emotional expressions can be divided into three categories: ASCII, emoji and emoticon. However, there is no clear standard for the classification. Some scholars agree that emoji is different from the emoticon. And their research manifests that there are different usages between emoji and emoticons (Prada et al., 2018). While other scholars hold the opposite opinion. They believe that "emoticons" – "emotion icons" for short – means graphic signs like smiley face, that usually occur in computer-mediated textual communication (Dresner & Herring, 2010). This indicates that "emoticons" generally include emoji. Other scholars conceive that emoticons, as one of the most distinctive new forms of language accompanying text-based CMC, refer to the punctuation-based renditions of facial expressions, symbols and objects, e.g., :-P or :-) and their update in pictographic form, emoji (Marengo, Giannotta, & Settanni, 2017). It implies that emoticons are the collection of ASCII, emoji and the emoticons in narrow sense.

The present paper follows the generally speaking emoticons, that is, they include emoji and ASSCII. And the mentioned emoticons in the rest parts will be in accordance. The classification of emoticons now is distinct and the author will introduce the functions of them.

1. GENERAL FUNCTIONS OF EMOTICONS

Although there are diverse categories of emoticons, they have crucial functions in common. Since there are many studies about the general functions of emoticons, the author of this thesis makes a summary from three perspectives: context, recipients and senders.

1.1 Functions From Context Perspective

Emoticons appear and are as a way to replace non-verbal communication when not face-to-face (Walther & D'Addario, 2001) to meet up the shortcomings of CMC communication. Communication theories, social presence theory for instance, have put forward that CMC is disruptive when the receiver tries to understand the content and nature of messages sender has sent because the medium lacks contextual information (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; Walther, 1992). Consequentially, such lack of contextual information renders the recipients perceive the senders of these electronic messages as behaving offensively and rudely (Jenson, 2005). Besides, previous researches highlight that social contexts are of great importance when interlocutors act their emotional behaviors (Friedman & Miller-Herringer, 1991), particularly for depicting positive emotions (Chapman & Wright, 1976; Kraut & Johnston, 1979). In this situation, text-based communication online is more businesslike, less friendly and task-oriented. When people communicate with each other, social context matters a lot. In the very time, emoticon rises in response to the proper time and conditions to make up the textual communication to enhance written communication just as visual or body language supports verbal communication (Derks, Fischer, & Bos, 2008; Rezabek & Cochenour, 1998), and enhance interpersonal relationship (Utz, 2000). Many researchers have the awareness that only with nonverbal cues in face-to-face communication, the meaning and nature of the message can be comprehensively understood. Furthermore, two main functions of emoticons have been identified by scholars: to portray social and emotional intent (Derks, Bos, & Von Grumbkow, 2008; Kruger, Epley, Parker, & Ng, 2005) and to decrease any possible ambiguity which is associated with the transmitted information (Ganster, Eimler, & Krämer, 2012). That is to say, emoticons can be seen as the additions to the message.

Indeed, total textual communication online can be misleading especially among unfamiliar people because this kind of communication is not like face-to-face communication, and people cannot hear the tone and see the facial expression of the speaker. That is, the context is not complete. Here, emoticons come to play an essential role to overcome the weakness of the CMC and are as the embodiments of emotional and social intent of the senders. With emoticons, the recipients can complete the context if the dialogues happen in face-to-face communication.

1.2 Functions From Recipients' Perspective

As for the recipients, because of the role of emoticons for context, recipients can understand the senders'

intent and emotion more easily and quickly compared with textual communication so that the recipients will not misunderstand the senders' meaning. Furthermore, the recipients sometimes can figure out the senders' characteristics according to the emoticons the senders' have sent, which is helpful for the recipients to choose proper words to respond. Therefore, emoticons can be seen as boosters of group rapport to establish intimacy for example (Derks, Fischer, et al., 2008; Golato & Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006; Hancock, 2004). Additionally, one study further illustrates how emoticon usage enhances recipients' positive emotions instead of negative (Gacey & Richard, 2013). More recently, researchers also find that emoticon usage enhances recipients' positive affect (Skovholt, Grønning, & Kankaanranta, 2014).

It can be concluded that emoticon is the catalyzer for the recipients. It can shorten the distance between the senders and recipients so that they can cooperate with each other which helps facilitate the communication. Besides, emoticons aid to construct the identity, which enables the recipients to response appropriately.

1.3 Functions From Senders' Perspective

What is the reason that people use emoticons? How emoticons function for the sender? Firstly, an increasing number of people, especially young people, employed emoticons as an informal and rapid way to convey attitudes, e.g., sarcasm (Dresner & Herring, 2010) and emotions (Riva, 2002; Walther & D'Addario, 2001) in instant messaging (IM), and in other social media (Dimson, 2015). Second, as noted by Walther and D'Addario (2002) emoticons assist the senders in expressing themselves as they intended which is the same as the visual and body language support the speech act in face-to-face communications. Besides, findings also demonstrate that those users use emoticons in IM for humor (Qiao, 2010). Moreover, emoticons are expressions to show senders' politeness as well, e.g. as face-saving strategies. What's more, according to a more recent research, results expose a number of themes on reasons for emoticon usage. The first is aiding personal expression, and the second is establishing emotional tone and the last is to lighten the mood (Kaye, Wall, & Malone, 2016).

Emoticons can also be used to dispel authority to seek identity especially for the young generation. The mainstream culture takes much of the "space" of society, subculture whose main force is the young generation feels so oppressive that the youth looks cynical and nihilistic, which shows no difference with cynicism (Jiang & Li, 2017). However, emoticon, as a kind of subculture, gives the young generation a breath – it is a way to dispel stress, sadness, even despair from the expectation from elitism; it also provides the users an opportunity to shape personal image, unconventional, cordial, cool, etc.. Different from the dominant functions mentioned above, this function is a recessive one. And there exists a dispute about this

function, which will be discussed in the following parts. No matter how emoticons function for the context, recipients or senders, these functions direct to the interpersonal function – emoticons move the CMC forward smoothly because they decrease the ambiguity of the context, the recipients, therefore, can realize the senders' emotional and social intent. Conversely, when one turn is over and there starts next one, emoticons can help both the initial recipients and senders to convey their virtual facial expression and tone, or to show humor and politeness as face-saving strategies, for example. In short, these cues enhance the text-based communication in the same way visual or body language support verbal communication. As a result, senders and recipients collaborate as face-to-face communication so that the interpersonal relationship will not be threatened in CMC if the senders or recipients do not get the true meaning of each other.

2. FUNCTIONS IN SPECIFIC FIELDS

Besides the emoticons' contribution to interpersonal relationship, emoticons also have numerous values in many other specific fields, like linguistics, marketing management, education and traditional culture diffusion.

2.1 Functions in Linguistics Field

Emoticons successfully attract scholars' attention in linguistic field and they are attached to the belief that emoticons play a significant role in communication. Studies show that emoticons come to work as actual language (Pierozak, 2003), to behave as a surrogate of non-verbal cues such as visual or body language and to contribute to the inclusive meaning of textual CMC messages (Derks, Fischer, et al., 2008; Jibril & Abdullah, 2013; Walther & D'Addario, 2001). Dresner and Herring also clarify three key functions of emoticons from the linguistic point of view: as emotion indicators, mapped directly onto facial expression; as indicators of non-emotional indicators, mapped conventionally onto facial expression; as illocutionary force indicators that do not map conventionally onto a facial expression (Dresner & Herring, 2010).

It can be seen that nowadays the research subjects in linguistics field are not only the words in traditional sense but also the new products - emoticons in communication. To some extent, emoticon is another sort of language from linguistic perspective which is helpful in pushing conversation.

2.2 Functions in Marketing Management Field

Emoticons can bring popularity and publicity for brands and public figures and behind the reputation, there exist high commercial profits. Line, a Japanese company, is a classic example. The number of emoticons sent from this instant messaging program every day is up to 1 billion one day, which gains profit over 1.8 billion RMB (Jiang

& Li, 2017). Besides Line, Starbucks also cooperates with emoticons – Starbucks Stickers. There is an application that smart phone users can install. Furthermore, some public figures also gain popularity by emoticons. Like Olympic swimming athlete Fu Yuanhui, her fans number increased by one million a day just because her emoticons spread rapidly.

In this field, emoticon is treated as commodity. Take online celebrity with huge fan base for example, if his or her news gains the most page views, clicks, or sharing behavioral data, it means this star is the most popular one, which follows a great deal of profits. The same to emoticons, if they gain the most download counts or sharing behavioral data, they will bring considerable return.

2.3 Functions in Education Field

Emoticons can not only provide fresh teaching materials and even open up a new teaching way, but also improve the class atmosphere especially in some serious courses. One study shows that 63.91% participants say their teachers use emoticons in class and they like them (An & Zhang, 2018). When one course is serious or the teacher of one class is serious, using emoticon is an excellent way to improve the atmosphere of the class. Students will change their prejudice about the class or the teacher.

In the contemporary world, education also need to keep up with the pace of the society. Old-fashioned and inflexible teaching cannot attract the students' attention. However, emoticons, as the popular symbols among young generation, can easily stir the resonance. There is a typical example in China. Chinese teacher represents the high authority and student dare not resist. Thus, if teachers can use emoticons properly in classroom teaching, it will make the distance between the teacher and students shorter. And it will activate the classroom interaction as well.

2.4 Functions in Traditional Culture Diffusion Field

Emoticons help the spread of tea culture (Huang, 2017) and historical relics (Wang, 2019). In 2016, hundreds of students from Huazhong Normal University wrote to Ma Huateng (CEO of Tencent Company) that besides coffee and beer, there should be Chinese tea in the emoticon menu of QQ and Wechat, which caused a stir in society. People supported this opinion and they liked using the Chinese tea in communication after that. In 2018, an art teacher from Zhejiang Province created one emoticon series whose role was the terracotta figurine and the bronze ware, which attracted millions of netizens' attention and became a new hot star. Netizens kindly called it "1000-year-old relic emoticon"(Wang, 2019). Actually, emoticon does provide a real practical method to combine traditional and modern culture. And this method can achieve a better effect than textbook teaching.

In the "fast food culture" Era, people even have no much patience to read over a long titbit news, not mention spending time learning traditional culture, which is also the dilemma of traditional culture diffusion. Therefore, combining traditional culture with what the people like is really an effective way to spread traditional culture. Meanwhile, emoticons get on the Express in the Internet Age and both young and old people use them in daily communication online. Out of the two considerations, the functions of emoticons in traditional culture diffusion is oblivious.

3. DISADVANTAGES OF EMOTICONS ABUSE

Despite emoticons have many benefits in various aspects, they also have their disadvantages. The disadvantages of emoticons are less referred to in foreign studies, but there are quite a lot worries about emoticons in Chinese studies.

3.1 Disadvantages From Interactional Perspective

Emoticons are treated as inappropriate in professional situation like emails and work (Gacey & Richard, 2013). Gacey and Richard's research manifests that it will be perceived as less professional if emails are with emoticons. Emoticons might also degenerate interlocutors' expression ability. There was a challenge – no emoticons in 48 hours. Most of the participants failed and they claimed that it was difficult to communicate without emoticons and they could not express what they intended exactly if emoticons were prohibited. And in researches of distributed teamwork, users were inclined to employ emoticons in teamwork communications if that emoticon utility was made available. In situations, however, where the members in the team could not employ emoticons, they were unsatisfied with the system which was used to accomplish the artificial tasks in the laboratory (Rivera, Cooke, & Bauhs, 1996). This phenomenon reflects that at the time when emoticons provide their users' convenience, they also destroy their expressive power.

On the one hand, emoticons do have many functions in communication, but they are not omnipotent. Recipients will conceive that the senders are not serious in formal situations if they keep using emoticons. On the other hand, convenient emoticons may lead the laziness of thinking and then expressing. Therefore, if people have to use words instead of emoticons to deliver their intent, they feel they hardly find an appropriate utterance to do the work.

3.2 Disadvantages From Social Perspective

Emoticons may cause Internet violence and nonstandard usage of language (Shen, 2017). That's because emoticons represent the rise of grass roots culture of which good and bad qualities are mixed together. Hence, some emoticons

are of four-letter words, sex and violence. If management is absent, these kinds of emoticons could become the tool of vituperating. Even other worse social problems may appear. Emoticons may infringe people's right of portrait, personal name, reputation, etc. as well. A film star Ge You has ever prosecuted eLong Network Information Technology Co., Ltd. for infringing his portrait right because this company made emoticons with Ge You's shot in one TV series. As a result, this company announced an apology in public and compensated Ge You 75000 RMB. Besides, in August 14, 2018, one documentary about comfort woman *Twenty Two* was screened in China. But someone should use the screenshots of the comfort women in that documentary to make emoticons with persiflage. In August 27, 2018, Shanghai Bureau of Public Security found out the malfeasance – Shanghai Siyan Painting Technology Co., Ltd. and announced that Shanghai Siyan Painting Technology Co., Ltd. would be stopped using Internet for two months and this company should be fined for 15000 RMB.

In fact, more and more people use internet and these people quickly learn to use and create emoticons to vituperate others. A typical example in micro-blog well proves this phenomenon – every day there are fans in different camps who post bad things in social media by different ways of which emoticons is the main strategy. What's more, since picture, especially celebrity, are one of the elements of emoticons, it's easy to violate others' rights. After all, emoticons are not something out of law.

3.3 Disadvantages From Spiritual Perspective

Emoticons may "amuse us to death" (Postman, 2006). Emoticons give the users a mode to dispel authority to seek identity especially for the young generation. But if they are too involved in it, they might lose the capability of thinking and judgement. All public discourse gradually appears in the form of entertainment. Our politics, religion, journalism, sports, education and commerce are willing to become appendages of entertainment. People will not complain even do the teasing for fun. As a result, they become a species of entertainment to death (Postman, 2006).

Actually, this issue matters in the education, and this kind of problems have the tendency to happen in young students. Because they haven't built up their own world view and they have no sense of right and wrong. Therefore, when one hot event occurs, it is easy for them to follow the trend for freshness and pleasure. If things continue this way, extreme entertainment will be the first priority no matter the talking topic is serious or not. They lose the heart of awe. As a result, education shall also focus on the mental health of contemporary youth. Although this is a "fast food culture" Era, it is still essential to keep traditional valuable consciousness.

CONCLUSION

Emoticons are like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, emoticons can bring a great deal of benefits in various aspects, like in context, recipients and senders. They can be the additions of the message so that the ambiguity of the context is decreased and the recipients can better understand the senders. Meanwhile, emoticons also function effectively in various specific fields such as in linguistics, marketing management, education and traditional culture diffusion. On the other hand, emoticons can be a trigger of interactional, social and spiritual problems. Emoticon abuse is inappropriate and sometimes it will cause social minuses like violence, law violation and extreme amusement.

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