

# An Empirical Study on the Use of Emojis by College Students From the Perspective of Symbolic Interactionism

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**Abstract**—The present paper, by referring to the theory of Symbolic Interactionism, through the questionnaire survey among college students, studies the functions and influences of emoji use in online communication. It is found that emojis have linguistic, social and aesthetic functions. However, it also has certain disadvantages and limitations.

**Index Terms**—emoji, function, network language

## I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, with the rapid development of science and technology, especially the emergence of digital technology, online communication has become the mainstream throughout the world. In China, such instant messaging applications as WeChat, Weibo and QQ, which are equivalent to Instagram and Twitter in the USA, have won great popularity among people. Emojis, a set of graphical symbols and icons, are frequently used in accompany with the written words on WeChat. Although emojis are by no means a real type of human language from the linguistic sense, they are replacing linguistic words in daily communications, which makes the online conversations more convenient and accurate. The emergence of emojis and its functions cannot be neglected. This paper, through a survey conducted among a group of college students, aims to explore the reasons why young people prefer to use emojis and what functions emojis play in our daily communication.

## II. AN OVERVIEW OF EMOJIS

### A. Definition of Emojis

The word “emoji” literally means picture characters. It comes from the Japanese kanji “绘文字”, in which “e” means pictures while “moji” indicates characters in the Japanese language. A Japanese designer Shigetaka Kurita invented this set of ideographic characters as he was engaged in launching a mobile network platform called “i-mode” (Yang, 2021). As a matter of fact, emoticons, a word blended by “emotion” and “icon”, was created before the invention of emojis, which refers to the combination of punctuations like parentheses and colons. For instance, “:)” represents a smiley face while “;)” indicates a winking eye. However, emojis are different from emoticons in that emojis are graphs that simulate real things. After Apple installed emojis into its mobile phone system in 2007, emojis have been warmly welcomed by users and gradually replaced emoticons. By adding emojis in texts, messages and even emails, users are able to express their thoughts and emotions that cannot be described in words, and the additional information carried by emojis “helps receivers understand the contents faster and more accurately” (Gibson et al., 2018, p. 92).

### B. Classification of Emojis

Judging from the way of formation, emojis can be classified into three types, namely, graphical icons, static images, and dynamic images. Graphical icons were first presented by yellow faces with people’s facial expressions, and then they were extended to a larger scope, including food and drink, objects, activities, etc. According to the website [emojipedia.org](http://emojipedia.org), graphical icons are categorized into the following types (See Fig. 1). Graphical icons are attractive and expressive, making online communications more convenient and effective.



convenient and popular. However, unlike face-to-face conversation, in which non-linguistic symbols are often used to convey a wealth of information, online communication has a risk of misunderstanding because of the lack of nonverbal cues (Tang & Hew, 2018). To tackle this issue, a new set of pictographic Unicode characters has been invented to retouch online language, which is what we know as emojis. Emojis. By simulating human facial expressions, body movements and other common things like fruits and vehicles, emojis can express meaning through these tiny and beautiful images (Alshenqeeti, 2016). Like emoticons and GIFs, emojis are regarded as the most effective tool to complete the meaning of written texts. The reason why emojis have become universally accepted symbols is that they are not subjected to language differences. On the contrary, they help to eliminate misunderstandings in a humorous and intriguing way. Till today, emojis has become the most frequent occurrences in online chats.

### III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### A. Social Semiotics

In his book *Language as a Social Semiotic*, Halliday (1978) puts forward that the grammar of language is not a code, not a set of rules for producing correct sentences, but a resource of making meanings. Thus, the idea of social semiotics came into being. There are six basic elements in social semiotics, namely, text, situation, register, code, the linguistic system, and social structure. Among the six elements, the sixth one, social structure is regarded as the most important by Halliday as it defines various social contexts where meanings are exchanged. Halliday assumes that the meaning of a sign does not necessarily depend on the sign itself, but the interplay between signs. As Van Leeuwen says, "Social semiotics is a form of enquiry. It does not offer ready-made answers" (Laura & Rupert, 2017, p.76).

#### B. Symbolic Interactionism

Human beings are social animals and they couldn't live without interactions with others. Symbolic Interactionism (SI) was originated from a sociological work *Mind, Self and Society* written by George• H• Mead. Herbert Blumer, after studying and summarizing Mead's thoughts of symbolic interaction, put forward the theory of symbolic interactionism (Denzin, 2004), which combines semiotics with sociology. Based on Symbolic Interactionism, human beings are living in a world of symbols and communicate with each other via symbols. Therefore, it can be said that human communication is not a direct process of meaning exchange but the process of encoding and decoding, in which symbols help generate or interpret meanings as intermediate media (Guan, 2004). Symbolic Interactionism consists of five central ideas, namely, human beings are social beings; human beings are thinking beings; human beings define their situations instead of directly sensing it; human actions result from symbols' interaction; human beings are described as active beings in relation to their environment (Lin, 2019). According to Symbolic Interactionism, a shared meaning space between people will form through the interaction of symbols in which the uncertainty of meaning exchange will be excluded. To put it another way, people need to know the symbols before they communicate with each other and they need to make a reply when they've got the meaning of the symbols. Only in this way can they achieve real and effective communications.

### IV. RESEARCH DESIGN

#### A. Aims & Questions

The present paper aims to study the functions and influences of emojis on online communication by taking college students as the study subject, hoping to explore the significance of emojis in language communication in the era of the Internet. The research is intended to find out the answers to the following major questions.

- (1) What are the purposes of using emojis?
- (2) How frequent are emojis used in daily online communications?
- (3) What are the functions of emojis?
- (4) What are the advantages and disadvantages of emoji using?

#### B. Subjects & Methods

The subjects of our research are college students. The reason why college students are selected as the subject is that college students are the group of people who use mobile phones most frequently and who are quite familiar with network technology. It is safe to say that college students are the most representative group. Another reason is that it is convenient for us college teachers to collect questionnaires. Therefore, the reliability and validity of the research can be guaranteed.

The research methods involve quantitative study and qualitative study. It is conducted in the form of questionnaire, whose design can be completed through a platform called Questionnaire Star, and then it is distributed to different students' WeChat groups. The students are mainly from Shanghai University of Political Science and Law, and a small proportion are from other universities. The answered questionnaires were collected and analyzed automatically by the software.

#### C. Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire which contains 18 questions falls into 3 parts. The first part includes 4 questions about basic personal information, the second part has 7 questions about the using habits of emojis, and the rest 7 questions are about personal opinions towards emojis.

In the first part, four questions about gender, grade, online hours and ways of chatting online are presented, which give us a rough picture of the respondent. In the second part, such questions as students' familiarity with emojis, preference of use, and frequency of use are asked. The third part focuses on the subjects' opinions of emojis, such as "Do you think non-verbal behaviors play an important role in daily face-to-face communication?", "Do you think Emojis can replace real human expressions and actions in online communication?", "Why do you prefer to use Emojis?" "What are the advantages of Emojis?" and the like.

A total of 108 answer sheets were proved valid. The male-to-female ratio of the subjects is approximately 1 to 3, and over fifty percent of the respondents are senior students.

## V. RESEARCH FINDINGS

### A. Frequency of Emoji Use

According to the data of the questionnaire, one hundred percent of the students admit that they know about and often use emojis in their online communication. As to the question "how often do you use emojis?", about 78.3% of the respondents chose "very often", 20% chose "not often" and only 1.7% almost never used emojis. The answer to the question "How long have you been using emojis?" is also surprising. Over 76.67% of the subjects have used it for more than three years. Among such platforms as WeChat, Weibo, QQ and mobile short messages, emojis are most frequently used in WeChat, accounting for 38.7%.

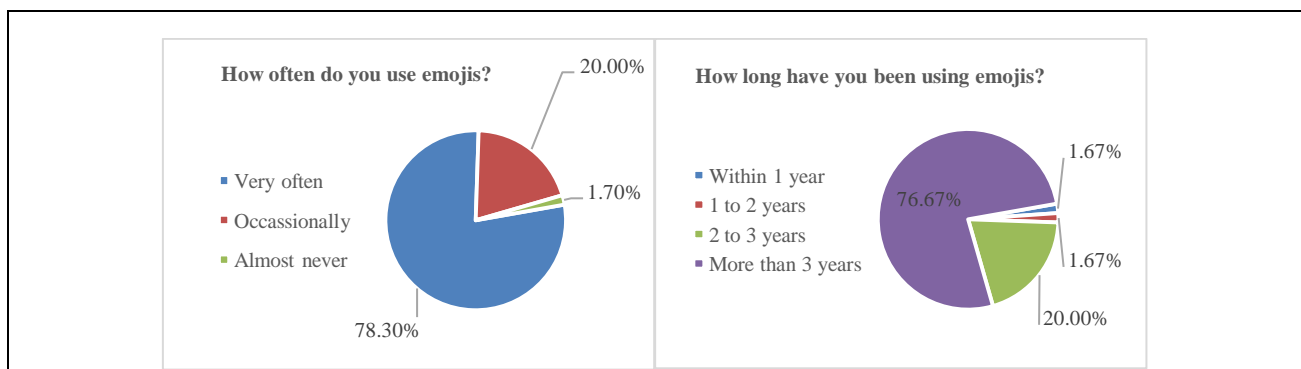


Figure 4 Frequency of Emoji Use

### B. Most Preferred Emojis

As is mentioned in the second chapter, there are about seven types of graphical icons. The study reveals that among these seven types, "smileys and people" ranks the first, occupying 96.67%, followed by "symbols and flags", at 73.33%. "Animals and nature" and "food and drinks" rank the third and the fourth respectively. The data prove the fact that in online communication, college students prefer to use emojis to represent human verbal expressions.

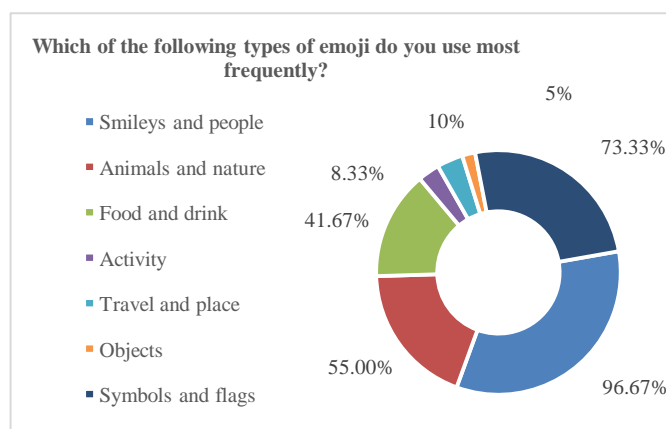


Figure 5 Most Preferred Emojis

### C. Objects of Emoji Use

To whom are the emojis sent is also investigated. The objects are categorized into five types, namely, parents and

relatives, friends and classmates, teachers, workmates and strangers. As for the questions “how often do you use emojis in conversations with the following objects” and “how often do you receive emojis in conversations with the following objects”, it is found that college students use more emojis while conversing with their friends and schoolmates than with their parents, teachers or workmates (see Fig. 6). It is a surprising discovery that the emoji interaction between the subjects and strangers is more frequent than their work colleagues.

#### D. Purposes of Emoji Use

With regard to the purposes of using emojis, the answers are various. Most respondents made multiple choices, among which “increasing the sense of fun” takes the first place. The others, such as “increasing the sense of intimacy”, “adjusting the tone”, “expressing feelings”, “livening atmosphere” “maintaining dialogue” and “replacing words” decrease in order, whose percentages can be seen in Fig. 7.

#### E. Responses to Emoji Use

Questions on the effect of receiving emojis are also answered. By using certain emojis in online conversations, 93.33% of the respondents feel “It is friendlier”, and 91.67% of them “understand the other person’s words better”. 95% think emojis can help liven the atmosphere, and 81.67% say they are more willing to continue the conversation. Unexpectedly, nearly half of the subjects agree that sometimes it is hard for them to guess out the exact meaning of the speaker and even feel offended due to the lack of emojis. See Fig. 8.

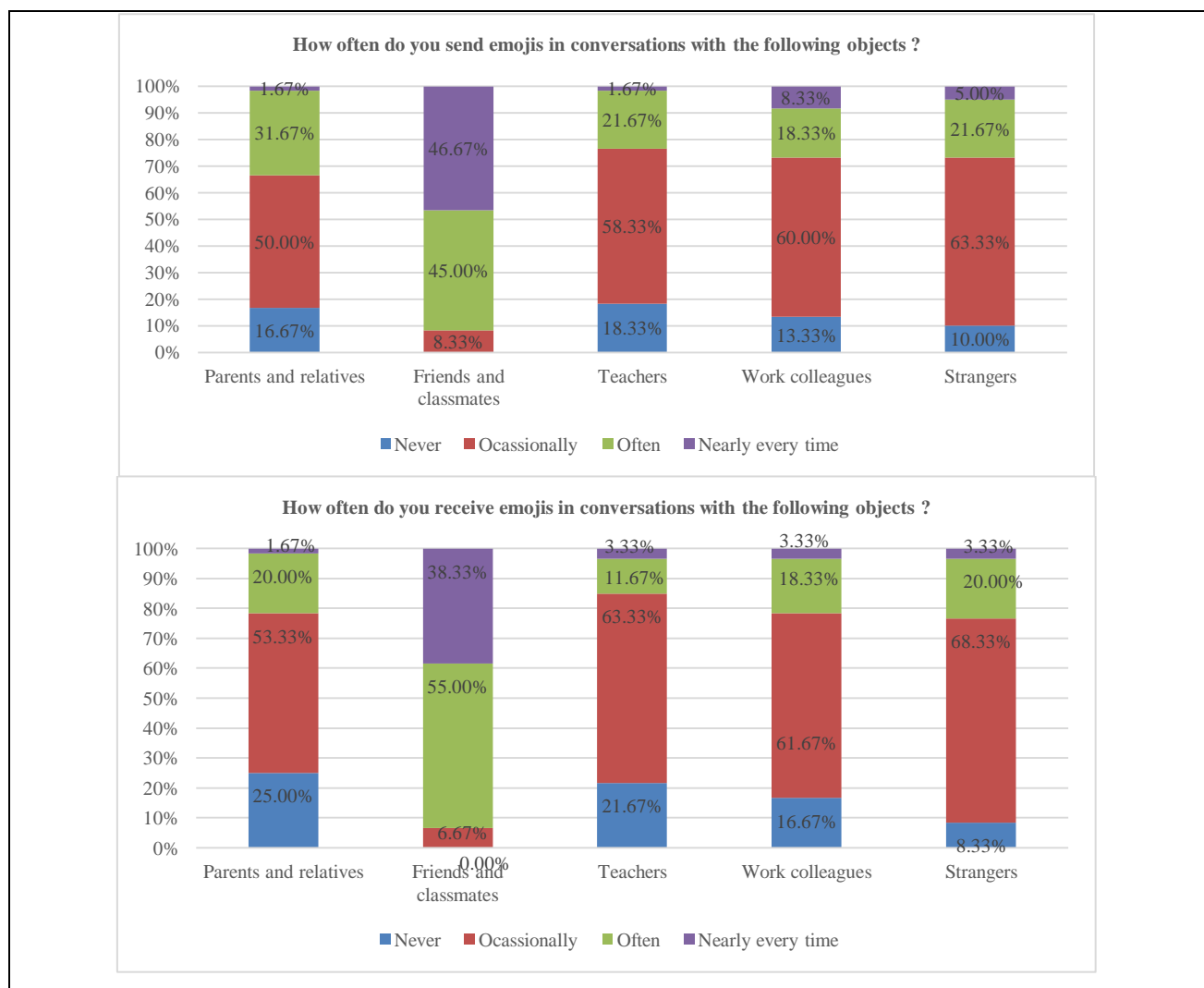


Figure 6 Objects of Emoji Use

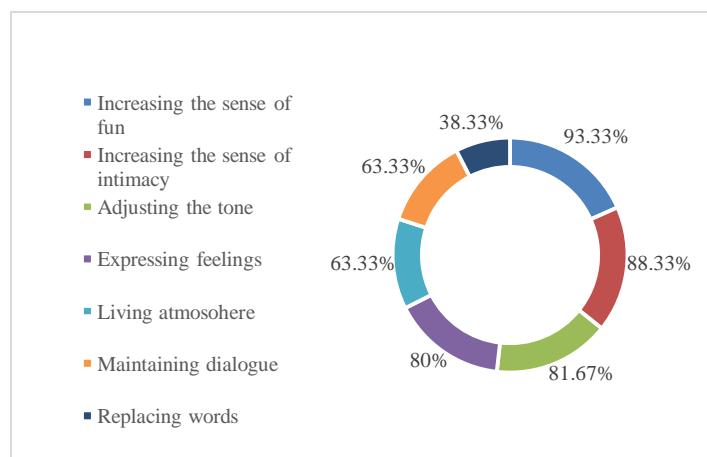


Figure 7 Purposes of Emoji Use

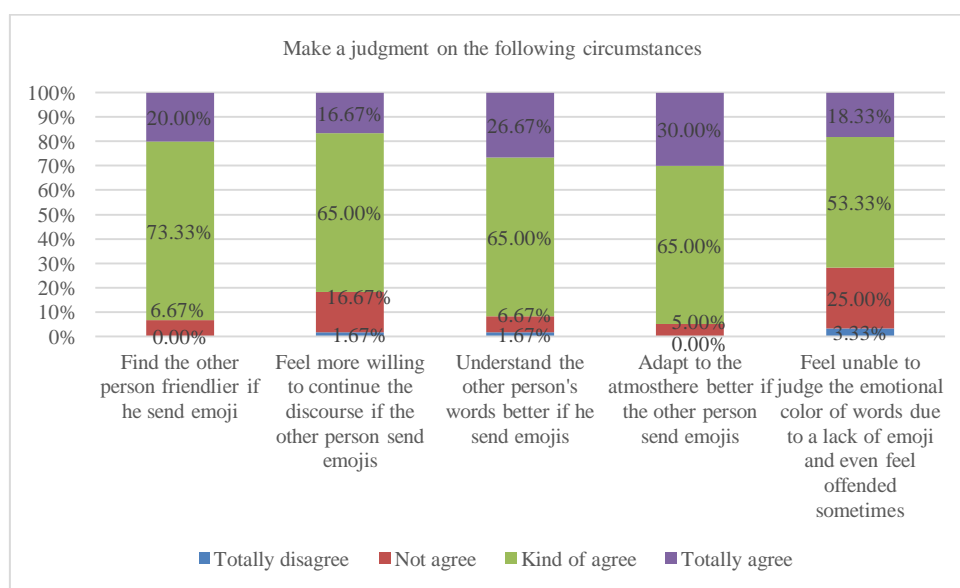


Figure 8 Responses to Emoji Use

## VI. FUNCTIONS OF EMOJIS

Albert Merubin, a famous American psychologist, put forward a communication formula, that is, the effect of successful communication is achieved by 55% of facial expression plus 38% of tone and 7% of language. The Merubin's Law indicates that language is not the most important element in human communication; on the contrary, it is the least important (Zhang, 2015). Such elements as facial expressions and different tones really count. It is especially true in today's network society. From the research findings, we are able to summarize the functions of emojis from two perspectives: linguistic functions and social functions.

### A. Linguistic Function

With regard to linguistic function, we may first explain it from the perspective of context construction. Different from the traditional face-to-face talk, the contexts of online communications might not be complete due to the lack of the assistance of non-linguistic cues like facial expression, gestures, and postures. However, with emojis, the integrity of the context can be maintained to a great extent. How do emojis fulfill the function of context construction? In online communications, people use emojis to substitute facial expressions or gestures to express their attitudes and feelings. Expressions and gestures indicate a person's emotional state, which can be merged into the textual conversation, thus making the completeness of the context. This is why over ninety percent of the respondents admit that they can better understand what the other side says by virtue of emojis.

In online communications, emojis are often used to strengthen the politeness or weaken the seriousness of words, making the text more acceptable to the recipient. Therefore, this function can be regarded as tone modification, which plays the role of changing the intensity of tone. For example, when an individual is in a bad mood and wants to express his sad emotional state, only by typing the words "I'm not happy" appears monotonous and weak, which is hard to find

an echo with the recipient. However, if he can match the words with an emoji indicating crying or sadness after “I’m not happy”, the text will become more vivid and resonant, thus enhance the effect of communication.

In addition to giving extra information to the words, emojis can also change the meaning of the words, most probably reversing the original meaning of the message. For instance, if a person receives the message “you are so generous” from his friend, he may take it as a compliment; however, if there is an emoji indicating a person rolling his eyes (🙄) is added after the message, the meaning is just the opposite.

From the above discussion, we can see that emojis have linguistic functions in that they can supplement, replace and even reverse the language. By combining words with pictures, a kind of extralinguistic effect is achieved.

### *B. Social Function*

Apart from the above-mentioned linguistic functions, emojis also have unique social functions. From the results of our survey, a majority of the respondents regard emojis as a tactic for socializing. By referring to all kinds of emojis, the user may present a friendly image while the receiver is likely to think the other side is easy to get along with. Actually, with the continuous increment of users, emojis are gradually becoming a widely acknowledged social norm for self-presentation.

Emojis also work as a kind of lubricant, adjusting the atmosphere and alluring the recipient. Our survey shows that more than fifty percent of the respondents tend to use emojis to break the embarrassment. In a face-to-face talk in our real life, facial expressions and body movements such as hollow laugh and scratching head are good ways to cover embarrassment. In online communications, emojis can achieve the same effect. Speaking of attracting recipient, emoji has its own magic. As has been revealed in our survey, over ninety percent of the respondents use emojis to increase the sense of intimacy and to arouse the other’s interest of conversing.

### *C. Aesthetic Function*

Emojis, as a visual art symbol, integrate visual elements into the information transmission process, which also convey a kind of aesthetic value (Song et. al., 2019). Early network emoticons were relatively simple, just lines and punctuations; however, with the technical support provided by multimedia technology, the newly developed emojis are more complex and diverse, whose artistic expression has been greatly enhanced and the degree of refinement has been continuously improved. The choice of emojis also reflects the artistic and aesthetic taste of different individuals. Compared with words, emojis are more interesting and attractive, which can alleviate the visual fatigue caused by too many words. Therefore, it can create a pleasant conversational atmosphere in communication and give people a beautiful aesthetic enjoyment.

## VII. REFLECTIONS ON THE USE OF EMOJIS

With emojis being widely accepted by people, especially the young, its advantages and disadvantages are becoming easy to notice. There is no denying that emojis play a key role in promoting online communication. From the perspective of Symbolic Interactionism, the non-linguistic information brought by emojis helps to improve the symbolic interaction between the two sides, which expands the shared meaning space between people. Bigger shared meaning space means lower meaning deviation and less meaning bias, which will guarantee efficient communication. However, the prevalence of emojis has also given rise to some problems, which are worth thinking about.

The first point is that the virtuality of emojis may cause people to lose their judgment. No matter how vivid the emojis are, we have to admit that they are only symbols, unable to reflect our subjective feelings objectively. In the virtual world, such things as age, gender, identity and social status all retreat behind a symbol, static or dynamic. It seems as if the user is wearing a mask on his face. Moreover, emojis may exaggerate or amplify the joys and sorrows of the user. Sometimes, the use of a “laughing” or “crying” emoji does not necessarily reflect the user’s real emotional state. In the relatively relaxing and free network environment, people tend to release their inner self and vent their depression of real life. And some even try to cover up their true self and reshape their identity by hiding themselves in the network emoticons. Therefore, when we communicate online, we need to keep a clear head and refuse to completely rely on visual perception for cognition.

Secondly, the abstraction and arbitrariness of emojis may lead to misunderstanding. People use symbols to convey information in the process of communication, which is like a process of encoding and decoding. As encoding is speaker centered and decoding is interpreter centered, information symbolization is not entirely equivalent with symbolized information, which is easy to cause ambiguity and confusion. Different individual experiences and symbolic situations are also prone to misunderstanding and biased interpretation. Take the emoji of a smiling face as an example. The original meaning of this symbol is only “smile”, which is often applied when the user is greeting others to show his friendliness. However, in recent years, the meaning of this symbol has changed to a great extent, as young people prefer to use it to show their ridicule, mockery or helplessness. This smiling expression seems to have the meaning of “hiding a dagger in a smile”. Those who know nothing about this change, especially the aged people, will inevitably misinterpret the meaning, resulting in failure of communication. Compared with words, emojis are not systematic and normative, and there is no fixed and unified standard to delineate people’s cognition. Therefore, misunderstanding and misinterpretation very often take place. In this case, images attached with words are encouraged to be used in



interpersonal communications on the Internet.

Thirdly, the use emojis will have a strong impact on the traditional language system. The emergence of emojis has narrowed the boundaries of various languages in the world to a certain extent and it is more like a return of pictograph, which is one of the oldest ways of recording things by primitive humans. As emojis provide a new possibility for people's communication in different countries in the world, it is likely to set off a revolution that will rock the traditional text language system and form a so-called "global language". From our survey we can find that some young people are highly dependent on emojis in online communication, so much so that their chat records are beyond the comprehension of the elders. We need to be vigilant about this trend. However, compared with the mainstream culture, emojis belong to a subculture as they have strong dependence on the Internet. If there were no social media platforms such as WeChat and QQ, they would lose their vitality.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

Emojis, as the product of the prosperity of the Internet and mobile technology, have become an indispensable part of people's daily communication and college students are the most active user group of emojis. The present paper, within the framework of the theory of Symbolic Interactionism, by collecting and analyzing the data about college students' use of emojis, has studied the functions and impacts of emojis in great detail. The popularity of emojis proves that words are not the only way to realize interpersonal communication, and the use of emojis helps to promote the diversified development of online communication. However, compared with the written language that has existed for thousands of years, emojis have not formed a fixed and independent system. We need to look at its popularity and development dialectically. How to lead the correct development of emojis and make it better serve people is what we should consider. The ideal prospect is that text language and different forms of emojis complement each other and jointly promote the progress of human civilization.

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