

The New Emoji as a Pictorial Cue and Parent-child Relationship Maintenance

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Abstract

This paper investigated the reason why it was not likely for the harmonious parent-child to generate conflicts due to new ambiguous emojis in Computer-Mediated Communication. We found out that it is because parents and children's perception of emojis function and senders' intention had no obvious gap. And parents believed that CMC has more benefits than face-to-face interaction when children were away from home. Our findings were come from four participants included in two families, and we interviewed them based on two parents' misunderstanding of new ambiguous emojis that have occurred. The method we used is in-depth interviews relied on WeChat chatting room and we used thematic analysis method to analyse the data. In this paper, we have contributed a few evidences to argue that it is a trend for parent-child relationship maintenance to take advantage of the new emoji in CMC.

Keywords

Parent-child relationship; CMC; FTF interaction; The new emoji; Misunderstanding.

1. Introduction

WeChat as a Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) platform has been used in daily interaction by people of all ages in China. Nowadays, children around 20 years old are usually away from their parents in university, and hence WeChat has become a popular communication platform which maintains parent-child relationship. In WeChat chatting room, the emoticon and the emoji are two pictorial representations instead of linguistic. The emoticon refers to the emotion icon which usually presents emotion with punctuation marks and letters (Rodrigues, Lopes, Prada, Thompson, & Garrido, 2017). And the emoticon is the precursors of the emoji that a small picture provided by WeChat chatting room like Figure1. Recently, this kind of emoji has also become diversified in form as the new emoji. In addition to the larger size like a photo, the content of the new emoji has also changed from a simple virtual expression to a real figure or animal. The common type of the new emoji is a graphical interchange format (hereafter GIFs) which refers to an image including looped actions, and the content of GIFs usually is a 1-2 seconds' drawn from movies (Tolins & Samermit, 2016). But the new emoji focused in this study has a more complex content than GIFs, and what the biggest difference between GIFs and the new emoji is that the latter includes the static form but GIFs. These new emojis can be gained from "Emoji shop" for free or through purchase in WeChat, or from users "Photo album" on devices, or be transformed from other social media platform like Weibo. Interlocutors in WeChat can take advantage of these new emojis in typing interaction in order to generate sub-topics to various relevant dimensions for adapting to the communication context (Goodwin, 2013). However, multiple technology-mediated formats sometimes constrain users' affordance or perception of these dynamic modalities during coordinating communication (Tolins & Samermit, 2016).

In this research, the new emoji in WeChat is classified from an emotional perception perspective: positive emotional conveyance, negative emotional conveyance and ambiguous emotional conveyance (Werner-Wilson & Perry, 2011; Wiseman & Gould, 2018). The reason of this classification is that our study is committed to investigate new emojis' impacts on family emotional relationship, particularly the parent-child relationship. The ambiguous emoji usually do not contain texts in the picture, and the figures or animals have no explicit emotional expression like pleasure, angry, or anxiety etc. According to the Wiseman (2018)'s statement, the ambiguous emoji have access to be multiple differing interpreted due to different cultures. Usually, ambiguous emojis are difficult to accurately get the meaning for receivers or it truly have little meaning. Therefore, this research focuses on the impact of ambiguous on emojis in CMC about family relationship are argued importantly. In terms of the family relationship and particularly generation gap in China, the definition of relationship has changed because of devices' development (Duck & McMahan, 2009). This study focuses on two families and researches how their parent-child relationships are maintained under the influence of WeChat communication with ambiguous emojis. Importantly, we manage to find out the reason of the phenomenon that parents' well-affordance for ambiguous emojis. Because these two families' internal relationships are relatively harmonious, which is our focus family type rather than the discordant family. And these two families know the two researchers, Wang and Zhou, in this study, so it is more convenient to conduct in-depth interviews. In addition, our research just focuses on the relationship of one single parent and his or her one child, and husband and wife relationship or non-only child family is not in our consideration.

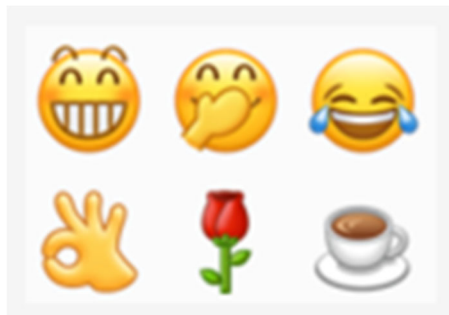


Figure 1. Old emojis

Due to our observation, controversial topics and research gaps of previous studies, this study mainly follows Rodrigues (2017)'s statement of different perception on emojis and the argument of Tandyonomanu (2017) that the emoji hardly can cause misunderstanding of senders' intention. We tried to fill the research gap that few studies have focused on how the new emoji influence parent-child relationship in china. Also, we focused on critical view of ubiquitous images (Wiseman & Gould, 2018) with conversation analysis (CA) method proposed by Meredith in 2017. And this research followed the Li and Zhou (2021)'s consequence that parent-child interaction in CMC can maintain the intergenerational relationship closely. Therefore, this study focuses on ambiguous emojis and family relationship maintenance between parents and children. And relying on our observation for two families, we designed a main research question that the reason of the tendency of Chinese parents' tolerant for perception gap of ambiguous emojis in CMC. Following the cause-effect pattern, this study proposed three research questions: (1). Whether parents' misunderstanding about the intention of the ambiguous emoji existed in the context of family harmony or not? And why? (2). Which one do parents from our focus family prefer between CMC and face-to-face interaction (hereafter FTF) for parent-child relationship maintenance when children study

away from home? And why? (3). Whether different perceptions of ambiguous emoji's function will cause parent-child disharmony even conflict in harmonious family or not? And Why?

2. Literature Review

This study focuses on the implication of the new emoji in WeChat on the parent-child relationship in China. Analyzing the new emoji rather than the emoticon (Rodrigues, 2017) or the old from emoji (Wiseman & Gould, 2018), we investigated different perceptive emotion derived from new emojis in CMC. Because CMC not only includes emojis' affordance, but also can be compared with face-to-face communication, so the research on CMC can be used as a link between new emojis' affordance and intergenerational relationships.

Among these three emotional conveyances (positive conveyance, negative conveyance and ambiguous conveyance), the ambiguous emoji has been argued with an opposing statement that triggering misinterpretation or conflicts in a specific relationship (Tandyonomanu & Tsuruyya, 2017; Prada & Thompso, 2017; Ran & Zhao, 2018; Rodrigues, 2017). But from our observation, this study managed to indicate that, nowadays, less ambiguous emojis presented in CMC can cause a severe consequence of family relationship, despite of different emotional perceptions between younger people (around 20 years' old) and middle-aged people (around 40 years' old). Next, comparing with face-to-face (FTF) interaction, CMC is situated on a virtual interactional platform called the internet community (Marengo, 2017). And hence the effect of Emojinating system (Cunha, Lourenço, Martins & Machado, 2020) on this platform with nonverbal expression in WeChat has also been a controversial topic. In more detailed, the relationship of CMC and FTF interaction has been argued that new emojis cannot be as effective as real facial expression or emotion (Tandyonomanu & Tsuruyya, 2018; Wiseman & Gould, 2018). However, this study focuses on the benefit of CMC with emoji affordances of around 40 years' old parents in China related to the function of pictorial cues. The concept of affordance is the property of items that utilizable cognitively (Joanne, 2017), and here it refers to the perceptive emoji meaning or function in online interaction. The previous study (Violaris, 2019) had focused on the semiotic property of the text, but this study focuses on the performative property of image from a multimodal discourse perspective in WeChat community. Then, communication between parents and children in WeChat takes advantage of Emojinating system (Cunha et al., 2020) to promote family relationship emotionally, even though certain misunderstanding phenomenon has occurred already internet community. Also, this study emphasizes the process of perception changes about the emoji and CMC because of our observation that parents' misinterpretation or over-interpretation is presenting a trend of compromise. And taking CMC as a midpoint to divide the study into two parts: the emoji in CMC and the CMC in parent-child relationship.

2.1. The Emoji in CMC

In fact, the emoji used as a pictorial cue (Lo, 2008) in CMC deliver personal facial expression or emotion exaggeratedly. All kinds of emojis represented in computer-mediated communication (CMC) was considered as a visual conceptual blending (Cunha et al., 2020) to calculate the visual perception and semantic knowledge in the Emojinating system. From a visual blending perspective, the Emojinating system was regarded as pictographs in CMC, blending language and image to trigger people perceptive positively. Although the previous evidence (Miller-Ott et al., 2012) has demonstrated non-verbal cues convey the ambiguity meaning in CMC discussion, our study tried to indicate the phenomenon of moderate misinterpretation or overinterpretation. Based on the remix culture (Goffman, 1974) of multimodal discourse, the interface of image and linguistic means a combination of emotion and language in one context. Goffman also emphasized the layering' concept in interactional discourse analysis. From the discourse analysis perspective, the emojis characteristic in written text has been demonstrated

that the emoji is the one-unit utterances with little consistency in verbal text (Cohn, Engelen & Schilperoord, 2019). No matter a single emoji or a sequence of emojis in CMC, they are the emoji-only utterances with minimal grammatical roles in the whole context. Hence, the remix of emoji affordance and language affordance is a sequential relatedness in Internet relay chat (ICR) proposed by Darren in 2017. According to Darren's explanation, the remix layering of interaction was the key dynamic in ICR, and images are merged into language as an overall integrational affordance. In terms of integration, Yongping and Linsen (2018) proposed Qingmian-threat regulation model as a conceptual framework derived from mutual affection. And this framework demonstrates that incorporate affection is a benefit for conflict mediation in interpersonal communication.

Relying on the definition of remix culture (Goffman, 1974) in online communication, in 2017, Meredith proposed an argument that the method of conversation analysis (CA) is suitable for conducting an in-depth experiment about CMC research, especially the online interactional affordance (Hutchby, 2001). Based on the emojis' feature of effective communicative tool (Cohn, Engelen & Schilperoord, 2019), in the conversation between senders and receivers in internet community, emojis in remix culture have the function of emotional contagion (Kleef, 2009). According to the Kleef's social information theory, there are two steps during a process of affective reactions. The first step is an unconscious mimic by emojis' receivers. Usually, individuals will have a physical reaction instantaneously after receiving a stimulus, and this process is unrelated with private cognition (Zajonc, 1980). Then the next step is accepters' relative response automatically. In summary, reaching an emotional contagion need an internally potential feedback in the emotional delivery, which conceptualized emojis as a simple element (Smith & Rose, 2020). And these above are our consideration and previous theories about emojis function in CMC.

2.2. CMC in Family Relationship

Despite the Emojinating system is a benefit for understanding, ambiguous images were argued by experimental data to convey inadequate means in CMC, and even promote conflict in specific relationship (Rodrigues et al., 2017). When it comes to nonverbal communication, Duck and McMahan (2009) have demonstrated the necessity of nonverbal expression including CMC and FTF interaction like facial expression, physical actions, eye contact in all interaction. Also, Grellhesl and Punyanunt-Carter (2012) demonstrate the motivation of socialization and affection-seeking that occurred in CMC. It means the perceptive initiation of Emojinating system stemmed from reality actions, which familiar with Hermeneutic spiral (Reed, 2017). Reed indicated that people's general understanding of CMC was prefigured from other's content like face-to-face practice communication. But a survey conducted in 2018 by Tandyonomanu and Tsuroyya for 135 voluntary participants. The findings showed that the emoji is just complement emotional expression instead of replacing FTF interaction, although it has little misunderstanding about the emojis intention. Therefore, the relatedness between CMC and FTF was indexed by Emojinating system coherently.

3. Method and Data Collection

3.1. Participants

We have interviewed four persons from two families separately. The interviewee one (female around 40 years' old) and interviewee two (female around 20 years' old) is a mother-daughter relationship from one specific family. The interviewee three and interviewee four are father-daughter relationship from another family. These four people were invited to conduct in-depth interviews. The reason why we choose interview because there is no previous study talks about new emojis' advantages for Chinese parent-child, and interview has more access to get the deep

reason for a phenomenon than survey. In addition, the education level of the mother and the father is above the undergraduate degree. And the two children are two undergraduates studying away from home. All of four interviews conducted on WeChat chatting area by typing, and period is 40-60 minutes. Interviewee one (the mother) was invited to communicate with one of the researchers (Wang) twice, the first time she provided the information that she had realized the generation gap reflected on CMC and she usually ignores her daughter's emojis. And most of time they can communicate clearly and fluently in WeChat chatting room. Based on this, we conduct the second interview on WeChat platform with interviewee one. And she asked to look at the question in advance and answer the question by typing because she thought this could provide more time to think. Interviewee two (interviewee one's daughter) provided information before an interview that she usually sends emoji with lovely girls to convey her emotion no matter who is receiver. And sometimes, she sent emojis without thinking.

3.2. Research Preparation

We have two screenshots (Figure 2 and Figure 3) about parents misunderstanding of emojis provided by the two family. Based on the content of the conversation in two screenshots, we interview the four people for four times separately. And they are divided into two groups. The first group has is a mother-daughter relationship from the first family. In this screenshot (Figure 2), the daughter sent this emoji just because the duck is cute and interesting, but her mother believed the reason of the action is her daughter desired to have something delicious food. The second group (in Figure 3) are a father-daughter relationship from another family. According to the daughter's explanation, she sent this emoji because it is funny, but her father over interpreted the image with words, *geju* (格局). Based on the two screenshots, we tried to ask more questions for the four participants, from the 3 perspectives, ambiguous emojis affordance, pictorial cues, CMC and FTF.



Figure 2. The screenshot from group one



Figure 3. The screenshot from group two

Figure 1 (Screenshot one):

Interviewee two:



Interviewee two: 我最近学习太累了。

I am too tired currently because of learning.

我都瘦了。

I have been thinner even.

我去学习了。

I am about to study now.

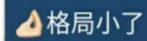
Interviewee one: 回家带你吃好吃的 学习吧。

I will take you to have delicious food after you come back go to learn.

Figure2(Screenshot two):

Interviewee four: 谢谢爸爸，我错惹！

Thanks dad, it's my fault!

Interviewee four: 

(Text in the emoji is I am stingy.)

Interviewee three: 小小年纪知道格局两个字，已经很不容易，很优秀了！

You are excellent for knowing the meaning of geju!

4. Findings

The data showed in the form of screenshots in this study is orientated to demonstrate that parents misunderstanding of new emojis has compromised, in particular ambiguous emojis. And computer-mediate communication (CMC) is a benefit for family relationship maintenance, despite a little over-interpretation occurred in the understanding of emojis, the function of pictorial cue is well-interpreted by parents. The data were divided into three groups as three reasons through thematic analysis, for responding the three research questions provided before.

4.1. The First Theme

The first theme focusses on the real reasons why children sent emojis and what their parents' perception for the intentions. And this group of data indicates the true reasons for the child's emojis are not much different from the reasons the parent believed. And the results show there is a phenomenon of understanding in the same direction about the function of emojis in the context of family harmony. According to the first family, it is obvious that the mother and the daughter understood it at the same way that attracting other's attention rather than describing emoji content themselves. In addition, the mother thought sometimes sending emoji is equal to say "hi" to other. Similarly, the daughter said when she wants to attract her parents, she will post an emoji, which is better than only a few words. According to the family two, when we asked the interviewee three, do you think emojis with obvious emotions like laughing or sadness are your daughter's true mood, his answer is emojis express emotion directly instead of the degree. However, the interviewee four mentioned the function of relaxing chatting atmosphere which her father had not realize. But he had known the emojis should not be over-interpreted, he just focused on the surface meaning and he believed that the image is an exaggeration of true emotions which is corresponded to the children explanation.

4.2. The Second Theme

The focus in the second theme is the comparison between CMC and FTF interaction. Based on the two screenshots (Figure1 and Figure2) of parents' misunderstanding, we invited the mother in first family and the father in second family to respond these questions. Finally, the findings indicate that parents believed that CMC has more benefits than TFT interaction like video chat in family relationship maintenance in most of time. The results answer our second questions about parents' preparation for maintaining parent-child relationship. The interviewee 1 said that CMC provide time to image my daughter's appearance and deepen emotional interaction. In terms of the interviewee three, the father had the familiar point of

view, because her daughter is not good at taking when FTF interaction, but in WeChat platform, she is active. In summary, both the interviewee one and interviewee three emphasized the benefit of CMC for different reasons.

4.3. The Third Theme

The third theme is also focus on parents' points of view. We asked them whether ambiguous emojis can cause their negative emotion or not, the findings show that the ambiguous emoji will not trigger conflict in parent-child relationship. So, this consequence responds our third question that different perceptions of ambiguous emoji's function will cause parent-child disharmony. During our interview, the interviewee one showed her positive attitude for the new emoji, she said I can well receive no matter what my daughter sent, although there is a little different perception to some extent between interviewee one and her daughter, she believed that the ambiguous emojis are new things worth learning. Also, the father in the second family believed that each generation has their own behavior habit, and it is important to give up different perception and live-in harmony. In a word, both the interviewee one and interviewee three had a rational and objective attitude to the ambiguous emojis and perception gap reflected in CMC.

In summary, these three themes are separately responding three research questions following a cause-effect pattern, and the findings keep the same position with the Tandyonomanu (2017)'s study.

This table below is a summary of findings.

Table 1. Summary of findings

Theme	Family one	Family two
The true reasons for the children's emojis were not much different from the reasons parents believed.	Both the parent and the child thought attracting others attention is one of emojis functions.	Both the parent and the child thought exaggerate emotion is one of emojis functions.
Parents believed that CMC has more benefits than FTF interaction in family relationship maintenance.	The parent thought that CMC provide time to image my daughter's appearance and deepen emotional interaction.	The parent said his daughter is more active in CMC than FTF interaction.
The ambiguous emoji will not trigger conflict in family relationship.	The mother said she can well receive no matter what my daughter sends.	The parent believed that each generation has their own behavior habit, and it is important to give up different perception and live-in harmony.

5. Discussion

This study argues that Chinese parents have compromised with different perception of ambiguous emojis nowadays and CMC is better than FTF in parent-child relationship maintenance to some extent. And our conclusion is drawn from two families with harmonious internal relations. As a result, three groups of data support themes as the reasons of why ambiguous emojis have not affect these two harmonious families' maintenance. In terms of the two groups of interviews in WeChat platform, both these two groups had experiences about parents misunderstanding for ambiguous emojis, but no conflict in family triggered by emoji. So hence the data we collected shows how emojis in CMC change with family members' interaction. We learned that parents are usually tolerant of children's behaviors and are willing to learn new things that children like such as new emojis and internet terminologies. Our two groups of data filled the research gap about emojis' form. Previous studies focused on many kinds of pictorial representation in WeChat, such as emoticons (Rodrigues et al., 2017), yellow smiley faces (Violaris, 2020) and GIFs (Tolins & Samermit, 2016). But the definition of new

emojis is provided in this study, which has more complex content and multiple access channels than emoticons, and new emojis have more form than GIFs, static form and dynamic form. Another gap we filled is the association between emojis affordance and parent-child relationship. Previous studies have associated emojis with romance relationship (Rodrigues et al., 2017), different mediums (Tolins & Samermit, 2016), parents subjective well-being (Li & Zhou, 2021), semantic and visual representation (Cunha et al., 2020) etc. Still, our position is the benefits of CMC for Chinese specific parent-child internal relationship.

Also, we made a further step about parents' understanding of ambiguous emojis. What our contribution was parents' acceptance of new things shows a positive trend. In a broader perspective, we have pushed the research of emojis ranged from how to resolve communication conflicts to how to enhance mutual feelings. Next, we argued that CMC could substitute FTF interaction at many times in harmonious family if it is not convenient to face-to-face interaction for parents and children. Although misinterpretation happened, this kind of situation cannot imply emotional sending and reception. However, our limitation is about family conflict consideration, because neither two families we studied can provide information about the conflict. Hence, our research has not stand in same position with Rodrigues (2017)'s study about conflict in a couple relationship.

Last but not least, this study should have considered the gender variable, but the number of interviewees is so small (one male and three female) that each single interviewee's idea cannot represent the general's ideas of male or female. Based on Butterworth (2019)'s quantitative research results, for the affectionate emojis like the kissing-face emoji, the female users' perception usually is more appropriate than male users. In terms of less affectionate emojis, the interpretation between male and female has no obvious difference. But this survey was conducted in US which is not suitable to analysis Asians' perception. And another previous study is about the romance relationship between female and male, which is unrelated with WeChat platform and family relationship. Therefore, the gender variable is a limitation in this study.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates the two harmonious parent-child relationship have not generated conflicts due to the perception gap of ambiguous emojis, and these two parents believed that CMC has more benefits than TTF interaction when children are away from them. The main reason is the perception of new emojis' function and sending intention are not very different between parents and children, and the new emoji can exaggerate emotion and enrich the form of chat. What's more, our study addresses the research gap about the new emoji's influence on Chinese parent-child relationship. And the future study can continue this topic and resolve the same research questions through more in-dept interviews and quantity studies. Importantly, not only the discordant parent-child relationship, but also the husband-and-wife relationship and non-only child family need to be emphasized in future studies, or classifying new emojis into more detailed sections for deeper investigate about emojis affordance and interpersonal relationship.

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