

The Functions and Characteristics of Emojis and Memes in Intimate Interpersonal Online Communication

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Abstract—Emojis and memes have become prevalent in digital communication, particularly in intimate online chatting. This research analyzes the use of emojis and memes in intimate online chatting through the lens of rapport management theory, with a focus on two questions: 1) What are the characteristics of emojis and memes used in intimate online communication? 2) What are the functions of emojis and memes used in intimate online communication? Using ethnographic methods, data is collected from an online chatting group called “Siblings in law,” which consisted of four members. Our findings revealed three characteristics of emojis and memes used in intimate online chatting: 1) Emojis are used more often than memes, but memes are preferred by online interlocutors. 2) Different individuals have different preferences for emojis and memes, and they use emojis or memes that their friends like to use. 3) The same emoji used in a different context may convey different or even opposite meanings. Additionally, we found that emojis and memes in intimate online communication serve three functions: 1) They protect the face of interlocutors by upgrading praise and downgrading ordering utterances. 2) They help realize the association principle of the rapport management theory. 3) Certain types of emojis and memes assist in achieving the interactional goal of intimate online communication.

Index Terms—Emoji, meme, interpersonal relationship, rapport management theory

I. INTRODUCTION

The present research focuses on the use of emojis and memes in intimate interpersonal online chatting. The ethnographic method is used to collect materials from real online group chatting, which are analyzed with rapport management theory to find out the characteristics and functions of emojis and memes in online interpersonal relationships.

A. *Emoji and Meme*

The advent of modern technology has revolutionized the way people communicate with each other. With the rise of social media platforms, netizens can now interact and communicate with each other virtually, without the need for face-to-face or telephone conversations. This has led to a significant shift in the way interpersonal relationships are constructed and maintained. However, many people, particularly the youth, find that the use of text alone can be inadequate to convey their full range of meanings and intentions [1]. As a result, the use of emojis and memes has become increasingly popular as a means of enhancing online communication [2].

B. *Rapport Management Theory*

Rapport management theory, developed by

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Spencer-Oatey [3], addresses a long-standing issue in pragmatics and interpersonal communication research, which has been excessively focused on individual autonomy at the expense of the social and relational aspects of communication.

The theory proposes three key concepts to explain interpersonal communication: face sensitivity, sociality obligations and rights, and interactional goals [4, 5]. Face, as a fundamental concept in pragmatic studies and interpersonal relationships, encompasses two types: positive face, which reflects our desire to be appreciated, praised, and respected; and negative face, which concerns our wish to avoid being controlled, threatened, or impeded by Penelope and Levinson [6]. Spencer-Oatey [3] further developed the concept of face by introducing three dimensions: individual face, group face, and interpersonal face. These dimensions illustrate how people perceive themselves in terms of their positive and negative qualities, and how they want others to acknowledge or avoid commenting on these qualities. Emotional sensitivity is a key component of face, which varies depending on the interlocutors, cultures, and contexts.

Apart from face sensitivity, sociality obligations and rights also affect rapport [5]. Sociality rights and obligations relate to people's social expectations, reflecting their concerns about equity and appropriate behavior [7]. These expectations are based on Sociopragmatic Interactional Principles (SIPs), which are linguistic norms governing communication in different contexts, such as legal agreements, normative activities, or business meetings. Two SIPs are particularly relevant: equity rights and association. Equity rights comprise two sub-principles, cost-benefit and autonomy-control, which emphasize the importance of acting with consideration for others and avoiding controlling or being controlled by others. The association principle has two aspects: interactional involvement-detachment and affective involvement-detachment. The former concerns the frequency and degree of participation in communication, while the latter pertains to the care, sympathy, shared feelings, and interests between interlocutors.

Finally, interactional goals refer to the specific tasks or purposes of communication, such as conveying information or expressing relationships, and these goals affect the relationship between communicators.

C. *Present Research*

The aim of this study is to examine how intimate individuals use emojis and memes in online communication, and to explore the characteristics and functions of these elements within the framework of rapport management theory. The study addresses two primary questions:

1) What are the characteristics of emojis and memes used in intimate online communication?

2) What functions do emojis and memes serve in intimate online communication?

The study is structured into four main sections. The first section provides an introduction to the research, focusing on the key concepts of emojis, memes, and rapport management theory. In the second section, the research methodology is explained in detail, including participant selection, study design, and data collection methods. The third section presents the findings and analysis of the data collected. Finally, the fourth section provides a summary of the research.

II. METHOD

A. Design

The present study utilizes virtual ethnography as the primary method of data collection. Virtual ethnography involves conducting ethnographic research in digital spaces, such as online communities, and utilizing the internet as the primary mode of research [8]. In order to explore group cultures in virtual worlds, virtual ethnography requires researchers to engage in personal experiences and actively observe the behaviors of other participants [9]. Angela [10] suggests that researchers in virtual environments should be referred to as “experiencers” rather than “observer participants,” highlighting the need for a deep involvement and close connection with the research subjects. In this study, the author is a member of an online chat group and has actively participated in every discussion to fulfill the role of an “experiencer”. Adopting the role of an “experiencer” in data analysis allows for a more in-depth and nuanced analysis compared to adopting an observer-participant stance. The collected data and material will be analyzed within the framework of rapport management theory.

B. Participants

The name of the online chatting group is “Siblings in law”, in which there are four members in total. And the members’ basic information is listed down as in Table I.

TABLE I: BASIC INFORMATION OF GROUP MEMBERS

Member	Age	Gender
Xu	22	Male
Yi	22	Female
Du	23	Female
Ran	23	Female

The chatting group has been established for four years. And it is established for friends to share their interesting life stories and discuss heated issues or news. The members of the groups are all alumni of Northwestern Polytechnical University. The members of this group first met through a university club and share a passion for reading and writing. Their similar taste in literature has led to numerous common topics of discussion. Initially, the group was created to facilitate the exchange of experiences and insights related to books, but the scope of their conversations has gradually broadened, and the depth of their communication has increased over time. As a result, the members have developed a stronger emotional connection with each other. The group

name “siblings in law” is a direct translation of the corresponding Chinese words. The original meaning is that their relationship resembles that of siblings who have a legally recognized blood tie. The reason for using this inappropriate English translation is to create a humorous name for the group. The members of the chatting group are chosen as the participants of the present research for two reasons.

Firstly, the selection of the “Siblings in law” chatting group as participants in the present research was based on the ease of material collection. The study focuses on emojis and memes used in online communication, therefore, a group that frequently uses these communication tools was required to ensure sufficient material for analysis. The group chosen had an impressive frequency of chatting and emoji/meme usage, making it ideal for the study. Ten days were selected at random to measure the frequency of information exchange in the chatting group, with an average of 428 messages exchanged per day (each chatting box was counted as one piece of information exchange). Additionally, 400 messages were randomly selected to determine the frequency of emoji and meme use, where 21 messages were memes (5.3%), 32 were emoji-only messages (8%), and 19 were combinations of words and emoji (4.8%). Thus, the “Siblings in law” chatting group was chosen as it provided adequate data and material for the research.

The second reason for selecting the chosen chatting group as the participants in this research is the intimacy of the relationship between the members. As the research focuses on intimate interpersonal online chatting, it is crucial to ensure that the relationship between each pair of members is verified as intimate. To measure the intimacy level of the group members, the Relationship Closeness Inventory (RCI) [11] is employed in this study. RCI comprises three dimensions that describe intimate relationships: frequency, diversity, and strength. Frequency estimates the time spent together by both parties involved in the test, diversity estimates the range of shared activities, and strength measures the depth and influence of one party on the other’s life. Due to the pandemic and the geographical distance between the four members, they can only interact online. As such, frequency cannot be measured accurately as it is challenging to track the time spent typing messages over a period of months. Additionally, diversity cannot be measured as all activities shared are online activities, which were not included in the diversity test in the original RCI study conducted in 1989 (since all items measuring diversity in the inventory are all concerning offline activities within one week like visiting each other, going to a party together and going on a trip together). However, the strength of the relationship between each pair of members was measured, and the results are presented in Table II. Items measuring strength are about how deep one party can influence the other. For instance, participants must gauge the extent to which their life plans may be influenced by one another. All strength indexes are greater than 5.15, which is the standard value of a close relationship, indicating that the members have intimate relationships with one another.

TABLE II: RESULT OF THE STRENGTH TEST BETWEEN MEMBERS

Strength Index	Xu	Du	Yi	Ran
Xu	\	8	8	7
Du	\	\	8	9
Yi	\	\	\	7

C. Procedure

After obtaining consent from the group members, the researcher recorded the emojis and memes used in the chatting group between October 1st and December 1st. The different types of emojis and memes, along with their frequencies, were then counted for analysis. Next, the Relationship Closeness Inventory (RCI) strength test was administered to verify the level of intimacy among the group members. Afterward, the researcher conducted interviews with all the participants to discuss how and why they used specific emojis or memes in different circumstances. The interview data, along with the collected data on emojis and memes, were used for analysis within the framework of rapport management theory.

D. Materials

The present research collected three types of materials: RCI data to estimate the intimacy level of the group members, a record of the memes and emojis used by the group from October to December, and an interview with all group members to gain insight into their views on emojis and memes in online communication. The RCI test results, which were introduced in the previous section discussing the participants, confirmed the group members' high level of intimacy. The memes and emojis used frequently (more than ten times) during the two months were recorded and listed in tables, revealing the characteristics of these popular symbols. The interview questions were tailored to the results of the data collected, and the findings of both the data and the interview can be found in Tables A1 and A2 in Appendix, respectively. Finally, an interview was conducted with all group members to explore their perceptions of the role of emojis and memes in intimate online communication. The interview outline can be found in "Outline of the Interview" in Appendix.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. The Characteristics of Emojis and Memes Used in Intimate Online Communication

After analyzing the data collected (see Appendix Tables A1 and A2), three characteristics of emojis and memes used in intimate online communication can be identified.

Firstly, emojis are used more frequently than memes, but memes are more preferred by online interlocutors. As observed in Tables A1 and A2 in Appendix, 10 kinds of emojis are used more than 10 times and in total they are used 456 times. Meanwhile, there are only 7 types of memes used more than 10 times, and in total they are used 117 times. While interlocutors use emojis more often statistically, they still prefer using memes in intimate online communication. During the interview, all members of the chatting group, including the author, admitted that they enjoy using memes more than emojis. The reason for this preference mainly lies

in the diversity difference between emojis and memes. Emojis are set in the app, and the variety is limited, which restricts the meaning they can express. Although emojis in the chatting app can cover most of the basic meanings required in online communication, they lack the ability to keep up with the newest internet trends. This is why memes are more preferred, as they are born on the internet, and the variety of memes is too vast to be counted. While most memes become outdated quickly, the newest ones can always keep up with the trend and be favored by people.

Secondly, individuals have different preferences for emojis and memes, and intimate interlocutors tend to use emojis or memes that their friends enjoy using. From Tables A1 and A2 in Appendix, it is evident that no emoji or meme is used evenly by group members. For instance, Xu uses the emoji 244 times, which is much more than the total usage by the other three members. Each member has their own preferences when using memes and emojis. According to Zhang and Yang's research [12], netizens prefer to use "ugly" memes to be entertaining. However, memes used in intimate online communication tend to be more cute than ugly. This is likely because the interaction goals of intimate online communication are somewhat distinct from other digital contexts, as will be discussed in the next section.

In addition to the differences in preferences, it is notable that all of the emojis and memes used more than 10 times over two months are shared by more than one group member, suggesting that intimate interlocutors intend to use emojis and memes that their loved ones appreciate. During the interview, all four members, including the author, answered "yes" to Questions 1 and 2. They believe that using the same emoji or meme brings them closer to one another.

Thirdly, it is important to note that the same emoji used in different contexts may express different or even opposite meanings. According to rapport management theory [7], interlocutors use different strategies to achieve politeness in different contexts (context domain). This is also true in intimate online communication. Under different contexts, the same emoji can be used and perceived differently in meaning, even if it may serve the same function in both contexts. Below are two examples that illustrate this point:

Conversation 1:

Yi: Do you know that there was a genius in our major who transferred to computer science in his sophomore year, and published a top journal in the next semester? He attended a top conference while facing COVID-19 pandemic in his junior year, and now he is pursuing his PhD at Stanford.

Xu: OMG. That's impressive 🤩🤩🤩

Conversation 2:

Du: My younger brother is not behaving well again. He's not studying seriously and doesn't listen no matter what I say. He's been complaining about headaches and refusing to go to classes these days. He even said he wants to take a leave of absence.

Yi: Your younger brother still behaving like this even in high school? He is really living up to his reputation. 🤩

The emoji "🤩" was used in both conversations to upgrade the meaning of the utterance, but it conveyed different

meanings. In Conversation 1, it expressed a positive meaning of “admiration and envy” under the specific context, whereas in Conversation 2, it conveyed a negative meaning of “disapproval and satire” because the context had changed. Interestingly, the same emoji conveying different meanings did not cause any misunderstanding, according to the interview. This can be explained by the context view of rapport management theory [4], which emphasizes the relational side of conversation. During a conversation, both parties would save each other’s face, and depending on the context, interlocutors would manage to send and perceive meaning according to the circumstances. Additionally, based on the interview, the group members proposed that they do not see any emoji as having a fixed meaning. They believe each emoji has a core meaning, and they perceive emojis around the core meaning with consideration of the context.

B. Functions of Emojis and Memes in Intimate Online Communication

The current study examines the roles of emojis and memes in intimate online communication using the perspective of rapport management theory. This section will explore the analysis based on three aspects: face sensitivity, social obligations and rights, and interactional goals.

From the perspective of face sensitivity, emojis and memes serve the function of protecting the face of interlocutors by upgrading the praise and downgrading the order in intimate online communication. Spencer-Oatey proposed that people often use strategies to upgrade or downgrade utterances to save face for others [5]. Upgrading is typically used to amplify praise and admiration towards someone, while downgrading is used in the context of asking for help, ordering others to do something, or when the utterance may threaten the other party’s face. In intimate online communication, emojis and memes can also fulfill the function of saving face by upgrading or downgrading. Examples of this are listed below:

Conversation 3:

Xu: Sibs, I’ve lost a lot of weight recently, look!
(Sending a selfie)

Yi: Wow, you’ve really lost a lot of weight!
Congratulations!!! 🥳🥳🥳

Du: Handsome to me!



Conversation 4:

Du: I was revising my paper until 2 a.m. yesterday, and then I couldn’t fall asleep in bed. My mind was filled with thoughts like “this algorithm won’t work” and “that algorithm can’t be used.” I didn’t fall asleep until 4 a.m.

Xu: What? This won’t do. The organization has criticized you, and even if you’re busy, you must ensure that you get enough sleep. Be sure to go to bed early tonight! 🌙

Ran: Correct, the organization criticized you, and make sure to get some more sleep today!



In Conversation 3, both the meme and emoji used to upgrading the accompany utterance. The “admiration” emoji and the “crazy happy dog” meme both present the meaning of congratulations to Xu who has successfully lost some weight. And in Conversation 4, the “hug” emoji and “hugging cats” meme both fulfill the function of downgrading the ordering meaning in the utterance accompanied.

From the perspective of social obligations and rights, memes and emojis serve the function of facilitating the association principle. As discussed in the introduction, to fulfill the association principle, it is essential to ensure that all members actively participate in the conversation and exhibit empathy and concern towards one another. Through the interviews conducted, it was found that using and exchanging the same meme or emoji can foster a sense of closeness between individuals. Moreover, selecting the appropriate meme or emoji can demonstrate care and compassion towards one another. Examples are provided below:

Conversation 5:

Yi: Sibs, I miss you guys so much! I just sent each of you the persimmon cake we made at home. Let’s video chat when you receive it.

Ran: 🍻!

Du: Very 🍻!

Xu: Very very 🍻!

Yi: 🍻 and 🍻!!!! (🍻 means “ok”)

In Conversation 4, the “hug” emoji and “hugging cat” meme were used to express care towards Du, who had to stay up late until 4 a.m. In Conversation 5, the “ok” emoji was used five times by all four group members. Even Yi, who had brought up the issue, answered herself with the same emoji. Using the same emoji has ensured the deep participation of all online group members and made them feel close and involved.

From the perspective of interactional goals, specific kinds of emojis and memes help to achieve the interactional goal of intimate online communication. As mentioned earlier, some scholars [12] have identified that “ugly” memes are popular among netizens. However, based on the data collected, these “ugly” memes are rarely used in the chatting group “Siblings in law”. The reason may be the special interactional goal of intimate online communication. According to the rapport management theory [7], there are four types of goals: relationship construction, relationship maintenance, relationship ignorance, and relationship challenge. However, in the case of intimate communication, the relationship between members does not require construction, ignorance, or challenge. Therefore, the interactional goal of their communication is solely to maintain their relationship. The memes and emojis they use are embedded with mild and kind core meanings with good intentions to fulfill the interactional goal. Memes and emojis with core meanings of threats, bullying, or bad intentions hardly appear in intimate online chatting.

IV. CONCLUSION

The present study examines the use of emojis and memes in intimate online chatting. Through an analysis of data collected from the online group “Siblings in law,” three

characteristics and three functions of these communication tools are identified.

The first characteristic is that emojis are used more frequently than memes, but memes are preferred by online interlocutors. Additionally, different people have different preferences for emojis and memes, and they tend to use the ones their friends prefer. The same emoji used in different contexts may also express different or even opposite meanings.

From the perspective of face sensitivity, emojis and memes in intimate online communication protect the face of interlocutors by upgrading praising utterances and downgrading ordering utterances. From the perspective of social obligations and rights, they help realize the association principle. Lastly, specific kinds of emojis and memes help fulfill the interactional goal of intimate online communication.

However, the study has some limitations. Firstly, the diversity items in RCI are not tested to estimate the intimate relationship among group member, which may lead to increased error of the result. Secondly, number of participants is limited to a group of only four people, which may limit the variety of characteristics of emojis and memes in intimate online communication. Thirdly, the study only analyzes the data from a superficial perspective by counting the amount of emojis and memes used. A deeper analysis may reveal more characteristics.

APPENDIX: OUTLINE OF THE INTERVIEW

Question 1: Do you use some emojis because you notice someone in the group has used that emoji before?

Question 2: Do you use some memes because you notice someone in the group has used that meme before?

Question 3: If memes and emojis are banned from using in the group chatting, how do you think of the effect of it?

Question 4: What do memes and emojis brings in the online conversation?

Question 5: Do you use memes and emojis all the time in all online chatting situation?

Question 6: Why do you use emojis and memes in an online communication?

Question 7: Emoji or meme, which one do you prefer to use more in online communication? Why?

Question 8: Emoji and meme may cause misunderstanding. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

TABLE A1: EMOJIS USED

Emoji \Times	Xu	Du	Yi	Ran
	244	8	31	4
	3	5	24	1
	4	1	29	0
	3	2	5	0
	1	9	0	0
	0	9	0	2
	0	0	25	0
	12	3	9	0
	1	2	2	5
	3	2	7	0
Emojis used less than 10 times	2 kinds	3 kinds	1 kind	9 kinds

TABLE A2: MEMES USED

Memes\Times	Xu	Du	Yi	Ran
	3	2	6	0
	9	4	11	3
	0	5	0	6
	6	2	7	0
	2	6	3	0
	3	6	4	0
	3	14	8	5
Memes used less than 10 times	12 kinds	15 kinds	8 kinds	27 kinds

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Liu designed and conducted the experiment, collected the necessary data, performed preliminary data analysis, and drafted the article. Dong provided many useful suggestions for the experiment, guided the analysis of the experimental data, and participated in the revision of the initial draft of the article. All authors had approved the final version.

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