



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 12. Issue 2. 2025 (April-June)

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

A Study on the Use of Emoticons in WeChat Communication Among Different Age Groups

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[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.12.2.118](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.12.2.118)



Article information

Article Received:22/04/2025
Article Accepted:27/05/2025
Published online:05/06/2025

Abstract

The WeChat emoticons is a unique form expression, which not only transcends the limitations of verbal expression, but also enriches the way of interaction, further optimizing users' needs and experiences. The study combines theory and reality to present the real situation of the aspects of using WeChat emoticons influenced by age factor, and through the investigation of people's WeChat emoticon interaction, who born in the 2000s, 1990s, 1980s and 1970s based on the questionnaire data, summarize the reasons leading to the differences.

Key words: WeChat emoticons; age groups; language variation; interaction.

1. Introduction

With the popularity of the social soft-ware WeChat in the world, a large number of different types of emoticons to meet the needs of different users. At the same time, the semantic system of WeChat emoticons is also expanding broadly. However, fewer scholars have been sensitive to the semantic understanding of emoticons and the influences of age factor during using emoticons to communicate with others on WeChat. Therefore, this thesis attempts to study the understanding meaning of emoticons, age factor and the interaction influenced during conversation, and hope to offer a more thorough understanding for the use of WeChat emoticons.

The virtual nature and the different communication forms of the network determine that the social network will inevitably integrate various expressions, such as text, emoticons, and posture. Therefore, emoticons are generated under this demand. The characteristics of WeChat emoticons are in accordance with the users' own preferences and character, reflecting the inner opinions of the users hidden from the surface meaning of the emoticons. Now, in the era of the WeChat emoticons, an emoticon can convey more than a thousand meanings. The same emoticon using in different chat contexts can convey different emotional attitudes and pragmatic functions. And the same emoticon used by different people will generate different understandings. At the same time, chatters are good at

making full use of various emoticons to switch their attitudes in order to express their intention and their real emotions. However, because people have different understanding of the same emoticons, especially for people in different ages, the misunderstandings will exist during conversation. Therefore, the study of network catchwords from the perspective of Internet language variation and the approach of sociolinguistics, which takes the WeChat emoticons as an example.

2. Literature Review

Emoticons refer to images used to express emotions and feelings, mainly consisting of real portraits, cute pets, natural scenery, cartoon characters, and sometimes adding internet slang. The evolution of emoticons has gone through four stages: character stage, system emoticon stage, self-made emoticon stage, and then hot emoticon stage. In 2003, Tencent QQ launched a series of Yellow Small Round Face emoticons, which simulate people's diverse expressions on small yellow faces and have the effect of expressing emotions such as anger, fear, anger, happiness, and sadness. With the popularity of graphic software and the introduction of custom features on social platforms, people have started to create emoticons based on systematic emoticons. And the emoticons simply reproduces the original facial expression to deconstruct the original meaning of the expression, giving the emoticons a new meaning.

The emoticons that this article aims to study mainly refer to the emoticons that come with WeChat systems, and define emoticons as a medium because they not only have the function of conveying information, but also reproduce nonverbal information during online communication, and have rich social functions.

2.1 Studies of Emoticons Abroad

The researches on emoticons in foreign countries can be traced back to the study of online emoticons in 1995. Foreign scholars have extended their research on emoticons to multiple disciplines, including sociology, psychology, education, and management. Foreign researchers focus on empirical research, usually using a large amount of data statistics and tables to analyze the use of emoticons in interpersonal communication and draw conclusions. Mohd Zhafri Bin Mohd Zukhi and Azham Hussain have found that emoticons are beneficial for promoting social communication, especially in terms of cultural significance that benefits society. Sabrina Chairunnisa and Benedictus A. S. have found through their research that emoticons has a role in conveying facial expressions and expressing personal emotions in interpersonal communication. In addition, scholars have studied the impact of emoticons on interpersonal communication from both linguistic and non-linguistic perspectives.

From a linguistic perspective, some scholars believe that emoticon is a visual symbol that is more vivid and intuitive than conventional language symbols, and can promote mutual communication among users. In January 2018, Marcel Danes mainly conducted research on the generation, content, and usage forms of emoticons from a semiotic perspective, further revealing the communication role of emoticons in modern society and the value they bring to people.

From a non-linguistic perspective, Tandyonomanu and Tsuruya have used emoticons as a non-linguistic substitute in their research, explaining the importance of emoticons and expected meaning transmission in textual information. Through qualitative analysis of the data, it has been concluded that emoticons can play a role in emotional expression in mobile communication apps.

2.2 Studies of Emoticons at Home

The research on emoticons in China is later than that in foreign countries. The earliest research on emoticons was published in 1998 in the journal *Computer*, and there have been no corresponding research works yet. After 2010, with the rapid development of social media, emoticons have become an increasingly important tool for online socializing, and research on emoticons by domestic scholars has gradually increased. Entering the keyword "emoticons" on CNKI resulted in a total of 1169 academic

journals and 834 academic papers. The research interests of domestic emoticons mainly focuses on the following aspects: (1) Research on emoticons design. For example, He Shen discussed the personalized design of emoticons in his Research on Personalized Design of Emoticons from a Network Perspective, explaining that the trend of emoticons design towards personalization is an inevitable product in the era of personalization from the requirements, functions, and design principles of personalized design; (2) Research on emoticon culture, such as Chen Ping's Research on the Emotional Expression of Emoticon Package from the Perspective of Network Subculture, pointed out that emoticons is the embodiment of network subculture, and discussed from three subcultural emoticons, namely "funeral culture", "ugly appreciation culture" and "roast culture", to reveal their unique rhetoric and emotional motivation; (3) Research on the use of emoticons, for example, Peng Lan pointed out in Emoticon: Code, Label and Mask that emoticon is not only a means of expressing emotions, its usage also has meaning of labeling for differentiating groups, political stands and as a means of interaction; (4) Research on the functions of emoticons, for example, Lu Zijiao pointed out in The Research on Image Function of Emoticon that emoticon have surface level of information functions, such as attaching to text, replacing language expression, reshaping identity, and deepening connotation. Indirect functions include expanding expression space, establishing emotional communities, and memorizing in social and cultural contexts; (5) Research on the legal aspect of emoticons, for example, Xie Tingting pointed out in Legal Protection of Portrait Rights in Real Person Emoticons that emoticons of real person lack detailed legal protection in terms of portrait rights. From the perspective of traditional portrait rights, she stressed the future development direction of portrait rights protection of real person emoticons.

2.3 Summary

Looking at these researches on emoticons from home and abroad, scholars have their own focuses when conducting in-depth researches on the use of emoticons and the meaning of emoticons from different fields and perspectives. A series of studies, such as some based on the meaning construction of emoticons, some from the field of linguistics, some from the field of communication, some from the field of social semiotics, are to study the use and the selection of emoticons, which have achieved certain fruitful results, especially about the characteristics of network emoticons, the development of network emoticons and the functions of network emoticons. However, at the moment, there still exists certain limitation and deficiency of these studies which mainly reflected as following: it is relatively few that how these social factors, namely the user's gender, personality, age, culture, educational background and living environment, affect speakers' choice of different emoticons to construct appropriate identities to communicate online in WeChat.

According to the researches on the emerge, evolution and the effect to transfer various meaning of WeChat emoticons, the purpose of this paper is to explore how the social factor – age is to affect the speaker understanding the emoticon in various contexts, which aspects of using emoticon in communication has the chatter been influenced by age factor, and what is the reasons leading to the differences in using WeChat emoticons.

3. Research Method and Design

This study centers on employing both qualitative and quantitative analyses methods, including two methods: questionnaire and case analysis.

3.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire survey is always applied by collecting information through a set of questions focusing on particular aspect.

On the basis of literature review of emoticons and materials collected about the contexts that people use the same emoticons but causing different understanding, this paper formulates a questionnaire, which has reasonable sorting to investigate the different understanding of the same

emoticons, the preference of emoticons and usage frequency targeting specific communities in which people at different age groups. The collected data is analyzed and summarized by SPSS 28.0.

3.1.1 Research Participants

138 people using WeChat took the questionnaire and they are all Chinese, whose ages are various: including WeChat users who born in the 2000s, 1990s, 1980s, and 1970s. A total of 15 question items are analyzed and studied.

3.1.2 Research Procedure

In January 2024, questionnaire data was collected through the *Questionnaire Star*, and then analyzed using the SPSS 28.0.

There are 138 research participants in this questionnaire, including 31 born in the 2000s, 49 born in the 1990s, 19 born in the 1980s, and 39 born in the 1970s. After SPSS 26.0 software reliability analysis, the Alpha value is greater than 0.7, indicating good structural reliability of the questionnaire. After dimensionality reduction factor analysis, the KMO value meets the validity requirement, which is greater than 0.5. Due to a chi-square value of 63.367 and a degree of freedom of 12, the significance is $0.000 < 0.05$, showing strong significance.

3.2 Case Analysis of WeChat Emoticons Usage influenced by Age Groups

The meaning and the form of emoticons is a unity. Sociolinguistics is an ideal paradigm for studying semantic potential. It regards language as a social symbol resource full of meaning and various forms of emoticons as tools to express meanings. Literature review has discussed the reasons, the development history, the types and the characteristics of the popularity of emoticons. However, people may have different opinions on the choice and understanding of emoticons. Therefore, the author has made a questionnaire which tries to get some useful information about people's opinion on WeChat emoticons, and how age groups affect people's use of We Chat emoticons?

3.2.1 Analysis of Differences in Understanding the Same Emoticon

WeChat emoticons, as a media, are a "cultural context" formed by alliances based on common interests, values, and shared practices. In this context, new media have facilitated new expressions of various "communities". These new expressions are not based on face-to-face interaction and shared regional knowledge, but on online discussions, with the same values and interests as the foundation. Therefore, the differences in values between different age groups lead to differences in cognitive understanding of the same emoticon.

There are differences in perception and understanding of the connotation of "smiling" on WeChat expressions, which are related to different age groups.

There is a significant difference in the understanding of "smile" between the four age groups, which is manifested as follows: (1) The tendency of post-70s and post-80s to perceive this expression as a "friendly smile" and "I am very happy" is significantly higher than that of post-90s and post-00s, and the proportion of post-90s and post-10s is significantly lower than that of post-80s and post-70s. The probability of chi-square test accompaniment is less than 0.05; (2) The tendency of post-90s and post-00s to perceive this expression as "I'm angry" or "mocking, satirizing, and helpless" is significantly higher than that of post-70s and post-80s, with the first two having a significantly higher proportion than the latter, and the chi-square test accompanying probability is less than 0.05.

Table 1 The analysis of different understanding of “smiling”

Items			Negative	Less negative	Neutral	More positive	Positive	Chi-square	Free degree
Age groups	Post-00s	N	15	9	3	2	2	63.367	12
		%	48.4%	29.0%	9.6%	6.5%	6.5%		
	Post-90s	N	22	13	7	3	5		
		%	44.0%	26.0%	14.0%	6.0%	1.0%		
	Post-80s	N	3	1	5	6	4		
		%	15.8%	5.2%	26.3%	31.6%	21.1%		
	Post-70s	N	5	5	15	6	7		
		%	13.2%	13.2%	39.4%	15.7%	18.4%		
Total		N	45	28	30	17	18		
		%	32.6%	20.2%	21.7%	12.3%	13.0%		

3.2.2 Analysis of Differences in Choice Preferences

Due to the limitations of the questionnaire and the diversity of emoticons, it is not possible to reflect different age groups' favorite emoticons through questionnaire. Therefore, more about age factor related to the use of emoticons can be learned by reviewing Tencent's annual WeChat data report. Meanwhile, due to the fact that the 2019 WeChat data report only presented a simple ranking of emoticons and did not carefully classify their distribution characteristics. In this section, the author will discuss the differences and impacts of different age groups in conjunction with this public report. The questioner and author investigated and observed the use of WeChat emoticons around the author. It is evident that people of different age groups will choose different types of WeChat emoticons they like.

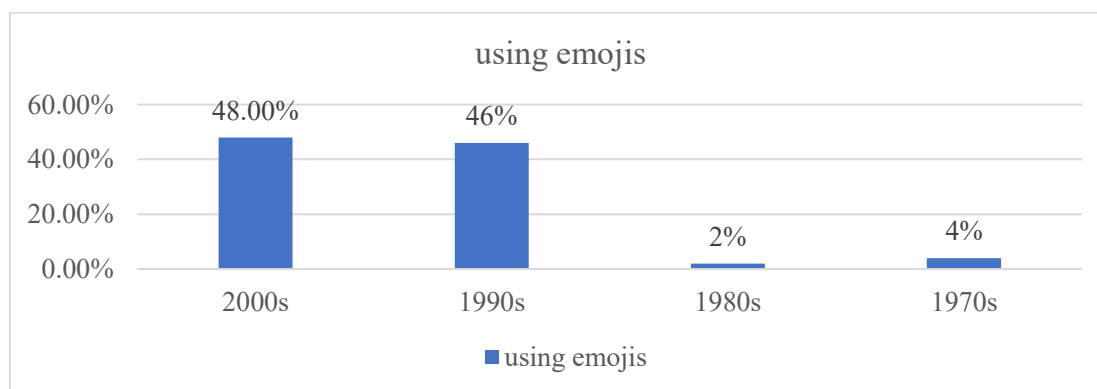


Table 2 The distribution of age in chatters' using WeChat emoticons

According to the age distribution of WeChat emoticons, the main users of emoticons are mainly people aged 19-24 and 25-35. It is overlapping with the main Internet users. The younger generation is the main force for constructing the network culture. They have the strong power to accept new things and can use them quickly as well as freely. And at the same time, from the table about the using frequency for WeChat emoticons, it can be seen that they are also the most active groups in spreading and propagandizing WeChat emoticons. The pressure of study or work make them use the network technology WeChat to win a looser network free space for himself.

- (1) The post-00s generations: The report has shown that the most popular WeChat emoticons among the post-00s generation users is “cover your face and smile”. And also, the post-00s generation,

who spend the least time on sleeping, almost go to bed late and get up late, meanwhile, they become active after 10 pm.

- (2) The post-90s generations: However, the post-90 s generation's favorite WeChat emoticon is "crying and laughing". Compared with users of other age groups, people who born in the 1990s, wake up later in the morning, travel most frequently on public transport and read everything from entertainment gossip turn to life emotion.
- (3) The post-80s generations: The post-80s generation's favorite WeChat emoticon is "grin with bared teeth", who enjoy reading and paying more attention to the national affairs.
- (4) After the post-70 s generations: The post-70s generation is the optimist and their favorite emoticon is "titter". They like to see the circle of friends in their leisure time best. People over 54 years old like the WeChat emoticon "likes" best, who usually go to bed early and get up early. Their online entertainment is very rich, including the circle of friends, reading and shopping.

3.2.3 Analysis of Difference Selection Frequency

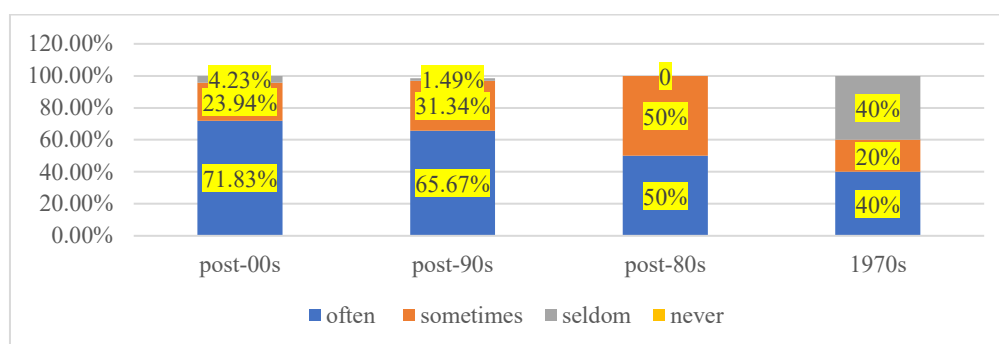


Table 3 The using frequency for WeChat emoticons

While using WeChat, the frequency of using WeChat emoticons among the post-90s and post-00s is significantly higher than that of the post-80s and post-70s. Specifically, in the "often" option, the proportion of the first two is significantly higher than that of the last two.

3.3 Summary

It is necessary to learn about the factors that influence the use of non-verbal language emoticons from the perspective of sociolinguistics. With the development of the society, the expression forms of language become more and more abundant, which also provides a realistic basis for the motivation and pragmatic effect of the use of emoticons. The selection of non-verbal language emoticons is inseparable from social development. The selection and application of emoticons need to be carried out through the interaction of various social elements.

4. Analysis of the Reasons for Differences

4.1 Differences in Group Identity

The development of society has led people to constantly create new words to enrich vocabulary. By analogy, word creation can create phrases or words that are semantically related, structurally related, or similar to each other based on the semantic connections of the prototype words.

A large number of words or phrases reflect social changes in a timely manner to meet people's expressive needs. The emergence of emoticons as a form of nonverbal communication mean is also related to more popular culture in recent years. The rise of short videos has made people more willing to use dynamic emoticons to express their opinions. However, the middle-aged and elderly population, represented by the post-70s and post-80s generations, are in an exceptional online social group and have their own language community. Different age groups have different social circles and their unique

understandings of emoticons. According to the survey, among the 39 post-70s, the most commonly used social app is WeChat for 32 people, QQ for 6 people, and SMS for only 1 person. The most commonly used social apps for the post-00s and post-90s are WeChat and QQ, and some college students often use Weibo. Different groups form their unique social groups on different social platforms, also forming different speech communities. On WeChat and Weibo, college students prefer to communicate directly using emoticons for convenience. These language symbols reflect the psychological pursuit of simplicity and fun among college students, with strong interest and diversity. The post-80s and post-70s generation places more emphasis on the dissemination of substantive and effective information in online chat. Their chat is mostly calm, "you say what I say," they speak in a gentle and elegant manner, pay more attention to chat etiquette, and choose emoticons more carefully, mostly expressing approval and goodwill.

Different groups have different perspectives on social topics, and post-00s have a faster grasp of hot topics and more diverse channels of understanding. Emoticon have been updated with the emergence of social hotspots, such as the "stomping" emoticon on a variety show called "Where Are We Going, Dad?" which many young people consider as a fun and cute expression to vent their frustrations. For social groups born in the 1980s and 1970s, if they have not watched this variety show, or even if they have watched it but do not know the meaning of the "stomping" expression, they cannot understand the deep meaning contained behind this emoticon.

4.2 Aesthetic differences

Due to their different social living conditions and practical activities, the post-00s, post-90s, and post-70s and post-80s generations receive different levels of aesthetic education, resulting in aesthetic differences between the two groups. From a semiotic perspective, emoticons are visual symbols that carry meaning. In the process of using social media to communicate through emoticons, people mainly rely on visual perception and understanding of text and images. The ability to process visual information is constantly accumulated through learning in daily life. Different experiences and accumulations can shape a person's aesthetic ability. These two groups filter a large number of emoticons in social media based on aesthetics, selecting emoticons that match their own aesthetic preferences. It is the fact that the post-70s and post-80s generations are mostly middle-aged people who pursue bright colors, Chinese style, and conservative style in aesthetics, they are more inclined to choose these types of emoticons while communicating. The post-00s and post-90s have a higher level of aesthetic education, active thinking, and pursue uniqueness. In terms of aesthetics, they pursue strange and exaggerated means of expression. Therefore, they often choose self-made emoticons and emoticons related to social hot topics, integrating their own understanding and personality.

4.3 Main Disseminators and Semantic Extensions

The rise of open new media such as microblog, Tik-tok, Kwai, WeChat, has enabled facial emoticons to have a larger platform for rapid transmission. Under this background, meaning of some emoticons is extended or transferred, or extended to a certain extent. For example, the meaning of the "smile" expression has shifted and has undergone significant changes compared to before. It is more commonly referred to as the "death smile", representing emotions such as "ridicule, helplessness". The transformation and extension of the meaning of emoticons reflect the changes in people's ideological consciousness and social psychology over a certain period of time, especially young people. The use of static or dynamic images in emoticons is faster and more mobile, and also has the advantage of stronger and more intuitive dissemination effects. Therefore, it is recognized and used by young people. The transfer of the meaning of "smile" reflects the contemporary youth group's association and understanding of culture, replacing the previous generation's position as the main disseminator of culture. The changes in the meaning of emoticons and their various usage forms are in line with the economic and practical pursuit of language by young people on the internet.

4.4 Principle of Linguistic Economy.

With the continuous development of high-tech in modern society, time-saving language communication and efficient information transmission have gradually become a common pursuit in people's lives. As a result, there has been a decrease in actual communication between people, while communication seen in the virtual world of the internet is gradually increasing. Therefore, the ability to transmit effective information in simple and convenient language forms has become an inevitable trend in the development of online language, which is also driven to a certain extent by the principle of language economy. In order to make communication more vivid, netizens use different methods to change or even abbreviate their original vocabulary, and combine various symbols to form emoticons. The purpose is to make communication more convenient, which to some extent also promotes the development and variation of online language, making it more concise.

5. Conclusion

Based on the above survey and analyses, the aspects of the age factor that influence the use of WeChat emoticons, such as differences in understanding the same emoticon, in choice preferences and selection frequency of emoticons, were sorted out. As for the influence of age factor on the use of WeChat emoticons, it is helpful for us to better understand the cognitive mechanism behind the use of WeChat emoticons by speakers. And then, it is concluded that the main age group for the use of emoticons is between 19 and 35. Meanwhile, according to the data report WeChat released on Tencent's official website, it has confirmed that users in different ages do prefer different emoticons and have different selection frequency. With these conclusions, the reasons have been analyzed from four perspectives: group identity, aesthetic differences, main disseminators and semantic extensions as well as principle of linguistic economy.

The father of modern linguistics, Saussure, once pointed out that at any time, contrary to surface phenomena, language cannot exist without social facts because it is a symbol, and its social nature is one of its inherent characteristics. As a non-linguistic phenomenon, emoticons provide people with richer and more diverse expressions, enrich expression methods, and inject new vitality into the development of social communication, has certain research value. However, as a social phenomenon, the use of emoticons varies among different age groups due to deep-seated reasons such as language, society, economy, communicators, new media, and aesthetics, reflecting the linguistic representation of the social psychology of contemporary youth groups. By analyzing the reasons for the different choices of emoticons and social psychology, it is beneficial to explore the hidden social development laws behind them, which has positive significance for the current development of the country and individuals.

This paper is supported by the General Project for the Central Universities "Innovative Research on Chinese Run-on Sentences in the Digital-Intelligent Era" (JB2025093).

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