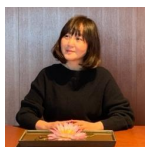**Mei-Ya Liang**

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Multimodal humor in emoji-mediated emotive communication

Bio data

Mei-Ya Liang is a professor in the English department of National Central University, Taiwan. Her recent research focuses on translingual socialization, multimodal storytelling, and computer-mediated discourse.

Abstract

Drawing on the features of sociality, mobility, and multimodality, the researcher presents emoji-mediated discussions among 43 university students in a Facebook group. The results of discourse-pragmatic analyses show the participants' frequent use of expressive and representative communicative acts and various types of multimodal humor, alongside laughing and thinking emojis. Utterance-final face emojis and other affective expressions have particularly been employed to make communicative moves and construct humorous discourses. This article discusses expressive and playful potentials of emojis in computer-mediated communication. This study may help to understand the impacts which social media are having on the students' development of digital literacy and affective linguistic practices.

Conference paper

Introduction

The widespread use of social media and the outbreaks of the COVID-19 pandemic have urged us to integrate digital literacy in language education while maintaining social relationships. Digital literacy involves textual knowledge, dispositions, and skills in multimodally and symbolically mediated practices, which provide new opportunities for developing creativity (Kern, 2021). The creative aspects of online text-based interactions are associated with the stylized performance to engage online users in learning to play in creative ways (Belz & Reinhardt, 2004; Danet et al., 1997; Liang, 2012; North, 2007; Warner, 2004). More recently, social media and mobile chat environments afford emojis and other multimodal signs, which allow online users to demonstrate verbal creativity and convey visual humor. Researchers have observed that digital artifacts, such as emoticons and emojis, co-occur with other verbal messages to perform social-emotive functions on various media and text-based computer-mediated communication (CMC) platforms, such as emails (e.g., Skovholt et al., 2014), weblogs (e.g., Kavanagh, 2016), Twitter (e.g., Spina, 2019), chats (e.g., Feldman et al., 2017) and Facebook (e.g., Konrad et al., 2020). Emojis have become conventionalized as illocutionary force indicators or tone markers to modify textual utterances (Dresner & Herring, 2010; Konrad et al., 2020). However, the playful aspects of digital literacy through the emotive

communicative acts of using languages and emojis as multimodal expressions have not been fully explored. To fully understand the playful potential of emoji-mediated communication, this study investigated university students' deployment of emojis in online discussions on news and media content, with special attention given to emotive communication and multimodal humor in a mixed-culture Facebook group.

Participants and Research Context

This study was part of a larger research project that aimed to explore online emoji-mediated communication among linguaculturally diverse university students as extracurricular activities (see Liang, 2022). This paper focuses on how emojis are used to mediate university students' humorous and playful discourses about various sociocultural issues and situations. Specific research questions are presented below:

- To what extent do the participants use face emojis in online discussions?
- How do the participants employ emojis to make emotive communicative moves?
- What types of conversational humor are produced in emoji-mediated interactions?

The research project recruited 43 university students (Appendix A), including three online moderators, 20 Taiwanese undergraduate students, and 20 international graduate students. The three moderators helped recruit participants from among their own acquaintances, friends, and friends' friends through snowball sampling. Accordingly, the relationship among the participants in this project could be viewed as a small social network of "weak interpersonal ties" (Milroy & Milroy, 1985, p. 364) through which we can observe the various innovative uses of a variety of emojis in online discussions.

The study examined emoji-mediated discussions in a private group created by the author. Although participants' interactions on the Facebook group are visible to one another, Facebook allows users to choose who can see their profile pages and posts and even to block other users so that they can keep certain personal information confidential. Discussions on Facebook can be viewed as a new form of sociality (Kern, 2021), which encourages user participation by friending, posting, liking, and tagging. Another two features—mobility and multimodality—are also essential because most Facebook users read text and watch images, photos, and videos through mobile devices, which allow constant connections and multimodal interactions (Tagg & Seargeant, 2016). Accordingly, participants in this study were asked to watch or read news and media content on Facebook and discuss them by posting their comments with emojis. During the eight-week discussions, two moderators took turns posting the discussion topics and questions (see Appendix B) by sharing multiple modes of interesting materials (e.g., texts, images, emojis, links, videos, and animations) on Tuesday mornings, and another moderator reminded the participants by tagging them on Friday mornings. The three moderators also socialized with the participants by liking and responding to their comments to establish and maintain social relations.

Data Collection and Analysis

The primary data were collected from online written discourses on Facebook for eight weeks over the course of the fall semester in 2020. The online discussions were first examined in terms of the number of words, comments, and emojis produced by the moderators, Taiwanese students, and international students each week. This revealed that the participants mostly used emojis at the end of utterances. The following analytic procedures were adopted. First, the analyses focused on the face emojis that occurred in the utterance-final position because they are closely associated with affect (Konrad et al., 2020) and, in particular, the humorous joking modality (cf. König, 2019). Second, after

recursive examinations of the data, the researcher and one research assistant coded the utterance-final emojis based on four communicative moves that the associated emotional expressions performed, i.e., (a) expressives: expressing what is inside the speaker's mind; (b) directives: directing interlocutors' actions; (c) representatives: representing what the world is like; and (d) commissives: committing to a future course of action. (cf. Scarantine, 2017). We first independently coded the data, examined the coding results, and achieved consensus on each coded item. Third, building upon previous studies on conversational humor and joking (e.g., Dynel, 2009; Langlotz & Locher, 2013; Messerli & Locker, 2021), the researcher identified types of conversational humor with utterance-final face emojis.

Results

The participants produced 4804 emojis over the eight-week online discussions. A total of 1486 comments were generated. The longest contained 232 comments (week 1), and the shortest contained 139 comments (week 7). The participants produced 71081 words. The three moderators produced 19947 words (M= 6649, SD=2684.58) and 688 comments (M=229, SD=99.057), averaging 29 words per comment. The 20 Taiwanese students produced 21005 words (M= 1050.25, SD=369.26) and 317 comments (M= 15.85, SD=7.34), averaging 66 words per comment. Finally, the 20 international students produced 30129 words (M=1506.45, SD=962.37) and 481 comments (M=24.05, SD=17.13), averaging 63 words per comment. Compared to the other participants (n=40, M=19.95), the moderators (n=3, M=229.3) made statistically more comments (t=3.65, p=0.034) because they were required to interact with the participants by responding to their comments. Compared to Taiwanese undergraduate students (n=20, M=1050.25), who tended to produce shorter phatic exchanges, the international students (n=20, M=1506.45) produced statistically more words (t=1.98, p=0.030), which may be a strategy to make their ideas clear to unfamiliar discussion group members.

Use of emojis

Of the 1486 comments, 1290 (86.8%) contained emojis. Table 1 presents the 10 emojis most frequently used by the moderators, Taiwanese students, and international students. All of these emojis are face emojis. Various laughing emojis (e.g., rolling on the floor laughing and tears of joy) and the thinking face are found among the top 10 emojis across all three groups. The tears of joy emoji, which, coincidentally, was the Oxford Dictionary's Word of the Year in 2015 (see https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2015), was the most commonly used emoji among both the Taiwanese and the international students. Notably, the moderators used the rolling on the floor laughing emoji more frequently than the other two groups did, which may be evidence of a diffusion of change within the small weak-tie social network. The international students frequently used the beaming face with smiling eyes and various grinning emojis (e.g., the grinning face, grinning face with sweat, and grinning squinting face).

Table 1. *Top 10 most frequent emojis*

Moderators			W1	W2	W3	W4	W5	W6	W7	W8	Total
1	🤣	rolling on the floor laughing	38	52	21	26	10	2	49	40	238(5.0%)
2	🤔	Thinking	9	26	12	49	14	27	4	19	160(3.3%)
3	😜	Zany	9	4	7	0	16	0	11	3	50(1.0%)
4	😢	Crying	6	6	3	4	15	4	0	5	43(0.9%)
5	😀	Grinning	3	9	0	10	0	6	1	2	39(0.8%)

			W1	W2	W3	W4	W5	W6	W7	W8	Total
6		loudly crying	0	7	7	3	1	13	0	6	37(0.8%)
7		Winking	3	7	1	9	3	4	0	9	36(0.8%)
8		hand over mouth	6	4	11	5	0	3	4	2	35(0.7%)
9		tears of joy	3	7	1	5	1	0	14	3	34(0.7%)
10		open mouth	5	4	3	6	0	3	0	6	27(0.6%)
Taiwanese Students			W1	W2	W3	W4	W5	W6	W7	W8	Total
1		tears of joy	16	19	14	16	8	4	20	35	132(2.8%)
2		rolling on the floor laughing	14	4	14	8	8	10	14	38	110(2.3%)
3		Thinking	7	8	8	4	13	1	7	7	55(1.2%)
4		grinning face w/ sweat	6	3	4	3	1	1	6	3	27(0.6%)
5		Monocle	0	5	8	1	5	2	0	3	24(0.5%)
6		Crying	2	3	4	1	0	4	2	3	19(0.4%)
7		Zany	3	2	3	2	1	1	1	6	19(0.4%)
8		exploding head	1	3	4	2	5	0	2	1	18(0.4%)
9		Pensive	3	3	4	1	3	3	0	0	17(0.4%)
10		grinning squinting	8	2	0	2	4	0	0	0	16(0.3%)
International Students			W1	W2	W3	W4	W5	W6	W7	W8	Total
1		tears of joy	17	9	22	27	18	12	24	31	160(3.3%)
2		rolling on the floor laughing	17	5	7	2	0	4	17	39	91(1.9%)
3		beaming face w/ smiling eyes	12	12	10	14	8	8	6	8	78(1.6%)
4		Thinking	6	5	9	18	3	1	6	15	63(1.3%)
5		grinning face w/ sweat	11	5	6	12	1	2	12	10	59(1.2%)
6		grinning squinting	11	1	4	13	1	4	4	3	41(0.9%)
7		slightly smiling	8	3	11	5	7	4	2	0	40(0.8%)
8		smiling face w/ smiling eyes	8	8	4	6	1	2	2	1	32(0.7%)
9		Grinning	8	5	3	5	1	1	3	3	29(0.6%)
10		Relieved	8	1	2	5	3	1	4	3	27(0.6%)

In line with Danesi's (2017) findings, we found that the international students tended to utilize face emojis with positive affects (e.g., laughing, smiling, grinning, and relieved). In addition to using laughing and smiling emojis, the Taiwanese students used a more varied set of emojis, such as face emojis with negative emotions (e.g., crying and loudly crying) and funny faces (e.g., zany and winking), which were not widely used among the international students.

As the objective of this study, participants were instructed to use emojis in the online discussions. For comparison purposes, the emojis used in the original Facebook comment threads in Week 3 and a set of online BBC news comment threads linked to in Week 5 are provided herein. Table 2 shows that the participants used a higher percentage of emojis than did general audiences on the original news and social media sites, which indicates the instructional effect of using emojis in this study.

Table 2. *A comparison of emoji use*

	Week 3 TikTok comments with emojis/all comments	Week 5 Mulan comments with emojis/all comments
Site data	152/3739 (30.81%)	113/1271 (8.89%)
Our data	141/160 (88.13%)	151/177 (85.88%)

Participants used face emojis, alongside verbal messages in their comments on a regular basis. In this study, which required the participants to use emojis, any lack of emojis in the interactions had certain implications. Some students may not have actively participated in the research study because they lacked pedagogical motivations. Other students did not use emojis when making serious responses or proposing conflicting ideas in discussions.

In what follows, the participants' online discussions with utterance-final face emojis will be analyzed to identify different types of emotive communicative moves and their functions.

Emoji-mediated emotive communicative moves

Table 3 presents the results of the four communicative moves used with the clause-final emojis in discussions over the 8-week study period. Overall, representatives (R) were the most common type (*n*=943, 40.84%), followed by expressives (E) (*n*=918, 39.76%), directives (D) (*n*=373, 16.15%), and commissives (C) (*n*=75, 3.25%). Here is one example:

W3-18CB: I just download Tiktok a week ago 🥳 (R). It's pretty fun to use 😆 (E)...not just ban it because it's from a different country 😡 (D)… I plan to post some😄😄😄 (C)

Table 3. *Types of communicative moves with face emojis*

	W1	W2	W3	W4	W5	W6	W7	W8	Total
Moderators									
Expressives	50	74	17	45	44	28	32	41	331 (40.12%)
Representatives	36	23	34	33	27	16	24	23	216 (26.18%)
Directives	38	25	31	43	29	32	38	30	266 (32.24%)
Commissives	2	1	1	4	3	1	0	0	12 (1.45%)
Taiwanese Students									
Expressives	37	57	22	26	36	23	18	47	266 (42.36%)
Representatives	60	19	58	33	28	24	50	33	305 (48.57%)
Directives	7	6	7	3	7	3	1	2	36 (5.73%)
Commissives	5	2	4	2	4	2	2	0	21 (3.34%)
International Students									
Expressives	46	45	26	42	35	27	45	54	321 (37.50%)
Representatives	90	34	69	55	25	39	58	52	422 (49.30%)
Directives	9	10	8	13	13	5	4	9	71 (8.29%)
Commissives	15	4	2	8	3	6	2	2	42 (4.91%)

In what follows, the participants' creative and playful potentials in expressing emotional or humorous stances will also be examined to see what types of humorous discourses are likely to occur in familiar and less close contexts.

Emoji-mediated humorous discourse

After examining conversational humor in emoji-mediated communicative moves, 14 types of jokes and figures were identified (see Table 4). Common features of the humorous discourse included allusions (*n*=44), similes (*n*=42), irony (*n*=34), self-deprecation (*n*=27), witticisms *(n*=16), ingroup bond humor *(n*=10), hyperbolism (*n*=9), teasing (*n*=9), retorts (*n*=7), putdowns *(n*=6), wordplay (*n*=6), paradoxes (*n*=5), vulgarity *(n*=4), and metaphors (*n*=2). Allusion is the most common figure type employed by the participants in their discussions on news and social media content.

Table 4. *Types of jokes and figures*

Terms (N)	Definitions	Examples
Allusion (44)	a citation alluding to a pre-existing text or popular culture artefact	W3-17-4CB: It's related to "Trump doesn't like it" 😳
Simile (42)	an expression comparing two things using *like* or *as*	W7-4JP: It's hard but amazing, like we are building the new Vavilon tower 🤩
Irony (34)	an expression that is the opposite of the literal meaning	W2-9-7WI: @AG I think the world knows what China is doing, they just ignores it 🙄 wow, what a friendly world 🙂
Self-deprecation (27)	under-evaluating or criticizing oneself	W2-5LE: a shame on me haven't seen it til this day 🙂
Witticism (16)	a clever remark interwoven into a conversation	W4-41-2JE @SN I think when the google finally get it, the restaurant is close. 🤓🙃
In-group humor (10)	humor that enhances the in-group image or relationship	W1-18-2JU: @SN So cute! So we're both foodies! 😁 😳
Hyperbole (9)	an exaggerated statement that creates a strong impression	W7-19 DA: Maybe we are so expressive so that all of our body try to communicate. 🤭😁
Teasing (9)	an utterance that makes fun of others in a playful way	W8-9-5KA: @RA the emoji you use seems high 🤣
Retort (7)	a quick and witty response to a preceding turn	W5-2-4JO: It is not our rights that we are defending, it is our sanity. 🙃
Putdown (6)	a remark to make something or someone foolish	W1-22-3 WI: Unfortunately, @VI gave back the knowledge to her teacher
Wordplay (6)	making jokes by using words in a clever way	W4-1-8VI: It's a good 'die' 'to die'!
Paradox (5)	a speech which contradicts itself	W6-22RA: I think it's pretty accurate overall since I'm not a mathematician
Vulgarity (4)	utterances in vulgar quality	W7-19 DA: Some are dic* or a**hole too! 😬
Metaphor (2)	an expression that implies resemble between two things	W6-20-8SN: @DA Well... so the spring is still very far away 🥶 🥶

Discussions and Conclusion

This research study has drawn on the features of sociality, mobility, and multimodality to guide the emoji-mediated discussions in a Facebook group. While previous studies have explored the online participants' perceptions and intentions behind emoji use in online discussions through surveys or interviews (e.g., Liang, 2022; Konrad et al., 2020), this study focused on online discourses. As a result of the instructions on using emojis in intercultural communication beyond formalized learning situations, the university students frequently used various emojis to convey emotions and stances and to multimodally contextualize their virtual selves in the discussions of online news and social media content (for details, see Liang, 2022). The results of this study also showed that 86.8% of the online comments contained emojis and that representatives and expressives were commonly used with utterance-final emojis for exchanging worldviews and emotive stances in online socialization. Contributing to digital literacy practices that are broader than reading and writing, multimodal emoji text can be useful resources for developing embodied viewpoints on a range of sociocultural issues in creative ways.

This study found that the linguaculturally diverse university students produced a range of humorous jokes and figures through allusions, similes, and irony, along with various emojis, in discussions of socioculturally sensitive or worldwide moral or health issues (e.g., COVID-19). Specifically, the participants used various laughing emojis and the thinking face frequently. As shown in previous studies, emojis can function as humor-support indicators (Messert & Locher, 2021), which help in making communicative moves and establishing conversational humor in the dynamic discursive practices of online networked communication. Although humorous language play could be collaboratively developed and maintained by the interlocutors to negotiate relations between the interlocutors, the media, and the context (North, 2007; Tagg, 2013; Warner, 2004), it is argued that the discussion topics and prompting questions affect how the participants interact in emotive communication. In this study, some of the discussion topics were more humorous or emotionally charged than others (e.g., the discussions on *English phrases commonly used in Taiwan that Americans do not understand* in Week 8), and some topics were more politically sensitive for certain groups of students (e.g., the discussions on Taiwan's political status in Week 2 and the discussions the Hong Kong protests in Week 5). Accordingly, emojis were used more often with expressives to express affective stances than with the other three types of communicative moves.

Through social networks, the linguaculturally diverse participants can not only post texts and emojis in CMC but also play with linguistic and visual modes of expression on the move in their everyday lives beyond classroom learning. Emojis can be viewed as essential multimodal elements of emotive communication and humorous language play in online written discourses, which prompt the participants in the social situations to propose new perspectives on serious or controversial issues. This study has contributed to a broadened view of digital literacies by integrating the critical and creative multimodal practices into the study of university peers' online discussions that involves the use of emojis. This study may help to understand the impacts which social media are having on culturally diverse students' digital literacy and affective linguistic practices.

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Appendix A. Participant demographics

	Moderators (n=3)	Taiwanese Ps (n=20)	International Ps (n=20)
Gender			
Male	0	8	15
Female	3	12	5
Nationality			
Africa	0	0	1
America	0	0	3
Asia	3	20	14
Europe	0	0	2
Age			
20–22	3	20	0
23–31	0	0	20
Expertise			
Engineering	0	0	8
Science	0	0	10
Arts & social sciences	3	20	2
Level of Education			
BA/BS	3	20	0
MA/MS	0	0	13
PhD	0	0	7
Marital Status			
Single	3	20	19
Married	0	0	1
Length of Residence			
Less than 6 ms	0	0	1
6 ms–under 1 y	0	0	8
1 y–under 2 ys	0	0	5
2 ys–under 3 ys	0	0	6
3 yrs or more	3	20	0
Household			
Alone	2	7	11
Spouse/partner	0	4	1
Classmates	1	3	1
Friends	0	6	7
Online communication			
1–10 hours/week	1	7	9
11–20 hours/week	1	10	7
21–30 hours/week	1	3	6
Text/video chat			
1–10 hours/week	1	11	13
11–20 hours/week	2	2	2
21–30 hours/week	0	7	5
Social networking			
1–10 hours/week	1	7	8
11–20 hours/week	1	8	9
21–30 hours/week	1	5	3
21–30 hours/week	0	1	1

Appendix B. Discussion Topics and Questions

Week 1 2020/10/06
台灣婚禮（Taiwan Weddings）黑素斯の熱吵店
(Taiwan Weddings Jesús's hot noisy shop)
https://youtu.be/h0UcsxxiZ8M
Have you ever heard of phatic words or cultural conventions in Taiwanese wedding banquets? How do you feel about the wedding etiquette? Share your family or friends' wedding stories with EMOJIS 🙂

Week 2 2020/10/13
A Quick Guide to Taiwan - TNNS
https://youtu.be/QaEBYegFABY
The host of the "Night Night Show," Brian, introduces Taiwan in an ironic tone. What figure(s) of speech do you like/dislike? Why🤔?

Week 3 2020/10/20
Trump says he will ban TikTok
https://www.facebook.com/5550296508/posts/10161147979141509/?extid=HRhd4MdqYMaHvxdg&d=n
Have you ever used apps which are operated by Chinese companies such as TikTok 抖音and Iqiyi愛奇藝? Do you think that the government should ban them? Why?🤔

Week 4 2020/10/27
法式英文挑戰! 你聽得懂法國總統在說什麼嗎? feat. 路易
(French English Challenge! Can you understand what the French President is saying? feat. Louis)
https://youtu.be/t-pwpQMegMg
Have you observed different ways of speaking English when you watch online videos (e.g., speeches, TV dramas, films, games, etc)? Do you think accent matters in intercultural communication? Share interesting stories with us🙂

Week 5 2020/11/3
Liu Yifei: Mulan boycott urged after star backs HK police
https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-49373276
What do you think about the hashtag #BoycottMulan on Twitter in response to Liu Yifei's pro-police comment on Chinese social media platform Weibo? Would you like to watch the film? Why?🤔

Week 6 2020/11/10
Taiwan No. 1 for Covid response: Brookings study
https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/4046909
Where is your county in this figure? Do you think it shows the current status of your country? Why 🤔? If your country is not marked on the figure, show the current position of COVID-19 pandemic with a meme.

Week 7 2020/11/17
Why I moved back to Taiwan from Korea? 🇰🇷 ✈️ ➡️ 🇹🇼 ⁉️😮
https://youtu.be/kGhtvEjrLEc
Have you been considered (im)polite when communicating with Taiwanese or people from other Asian countries? How do you mix English, other languages, or multiple ways of expression to communicate with local people in the conversations? Share interesting stories with us🙂

Week 8 2020/11/24
【我們看不懂英文 ⁉️ 😱 】美國人無法理解的台灣常用英文｜彩曦&阿登
([We don't understand English!? 😱] English phrases commonly used in Taiwan that Americans do not understand | Hailey & Adam)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XniMHfCf0c4&app=desktop
What kinds of nonstandard Englishes have you ever seen or heard in Taiwan (e.g, slogans, ads, public displays, etc)? Share interesting stories with us🙂