

Research on Age Differences and Motivation in the Use of WeChat Emojis

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ABSTRACT

In WeChat communication, there are intergenerational differences in the use of emojis among people of different age groups. This study adopts a questionnaire survey method, designs a questionnaire based on the WHO age classification criteria, and distributes and collects 73 valid questionnaires through the Wenjuanxing platform (effective response rate of 100%). The research results show that there are significant differences in emoji usage among different age groups. Young people (aged 18-44, mainly 18-35) have the highest usage frequency and the most diverse types; middle-aged people (44-59) have a lower usage frequency and a more limited range of types; and elderly people (aged 59 and above) have the lowest usage frequency. The commonality among these three groups is that they all use cartoon-image emojis, and they tend to send 1-2 emojis at a time. The core purpose of using emojis across all groups is to express emotions and liven up the chat atmosphere, but there are differences in their intrinsic motivations. Through analysis, this study concludes that the intergenerational motivations are as follows: young people focus on fitting social trends, conveying emotions, and achieving interactive fun; middle-aged and elderly groups tend to simplify communication expression, ease the communication atmosphere, or use emojis to bridge the gap with others, making interactions more intimate.

Keywords: WeChat emojis, Emoji packs, Sentiment analysis, Generational differences.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the advancement of Internet technology and the development of social media, online communication has become increasingly popular. WeChat emojis have increasingly gained widespread favor among various social groups. People of all ages in society use emojis or emoticons to express themselves in WeChat communication. It is not surprising that the rise of emoji communication on WeChat has become a new form of online interaction, forming a means that parallels text and voice.

Nowadays, the use of emojis has become increasingly prevalent. When faced with a wide range of images, people have a motivation to shape their own image during the selection and use process. Emojis can also serve as a universally used and fluid communication symbol that circulates in the flat online society, allowing people to seek out others with similar interests through their use of emojis. The use of emojis can significantly enhance

the intimacy between communicating parties. In other words, the use of emojis in communication can narrow the emotional distance between both parties and promote the maintenance of positive interpersonal relationships.

In previous studies, the subjects selected were mostly university faculty and staff, which had certain limitations in terms of age distribution, and each individual's cultural level and understanding of the Internet varied. The research subjects were predominantly those born in the 1970s and 1980s, with a small number of younger groups. Whether the habits and characteristics of WeChat emoji usage among younger groups are similar to those of the research subjects remains to be further studied. This article mainly investigates, through questionnaire surveys, how the use of emojis differs across different age groups in WeChat communication, and analyzes the underlying main reasons.

2. DEFINITION OF EMOJIS AND EMOJI PACKS

"Exploring the Problems and Countermeasures of College Students' Use of WeChat Emojis" (Wang Mengyuan, Zhang Yaming) points out that emojis refer to image symbols used by users, such as portraits, animals, scenery, etc., to express emotions, moods, and attitudes. In 2011, the 3.5 version of WeChat first introduced WeChat emojis primarily featuring cartoon images, which were mainly used by users for simple emotional expression. Later, with the diversification of emoji composition elements and the emergence of user-generated content (UGC) behavior, the meaning and function of emojis became more diverse, making emojis an important popular discourse system. They can serve as a powerful visual impact and an intuitive and rapid means of conveying information. "Research on the Phenomenon of WeChat Emoji Usage" (Xie Qiaoyin) proposes that the emergence of emojis can be divided into three stages: the first stage is emoji text, the second stage is emoji drawing, and the third stage is emojis. Based on this research result, the author designed the last question of the questionnaire survey, which demonstrates the referential and credible nature of the last question's options.

3. WECHAT EMOJI SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

3.1 Questionnaire Design

This questionnaire is mainly divided into two parts. The first part involves gathering personal information about the respondents, including their age. The second part aims to understand the respondents' usage of emojis on WeChat, including the number of times they use them, the frequency of one-time use, the types of emojis used, and so on.

This study primarily employs a questionnaire survey method for empirical research. Building upon existing research, this study integrates the characteristics of emojis and online information exchange, thereby developing an initial questionnaire corresponding to the research model. Due to the lack of reference to mature scales related to emojis, a pre-survey was conducted to ultimately form a formal questionnaire.

Based on the WHO's classification of age, the questionnaire can be broadly divided into two parts: the personal information of the respondents (specifically, their age) and their usage of emojis. In this study, the age range of young people primarily focuses on 18 to 35 years old. A total of 73 valid questionnaires were collected in this study, among which 4.11% of the respondents were aged 18 and below, 53.42% were aged 18 to 44, 21.92% were aged 44 to 59, and 20.55% were aged 59 and above. The specific situation is shown in "Figure 1".

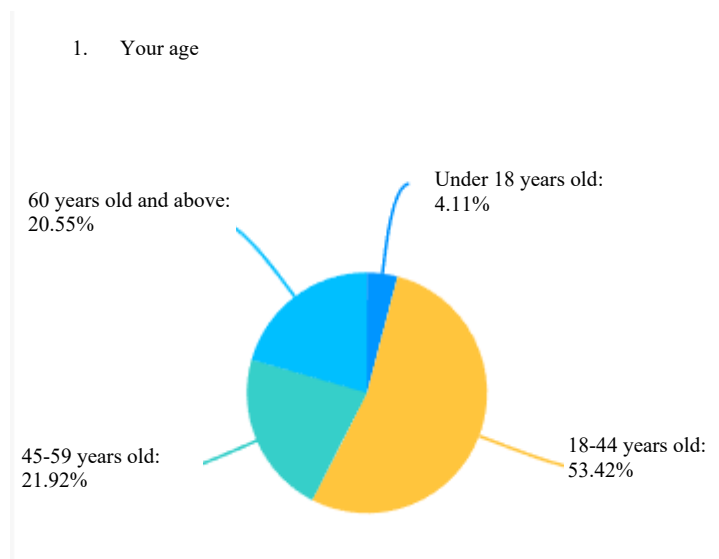


Figure 1 Age distribution of respondents.

3.2 Distribution and Collection of Questionnaires

The survey subjects of this study are, people of various ages. These individuals recognize the connection and use of the internet and regard it as a part of their life and work. In their daily lives, they have considerable experience using emojis and possess good information comprehension skills. This study chooses online channels to distribute questionnaires. The website used for the study is Wenjuanxing (www.sojump.com).

4. DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Descriptive Analysis

4.1.1 Result Description

Background data reveals that people of different age groups use different types of emojis. Among the 73 questionnaires, 57 included cartoon images. Among these 57 questionnaires, most respondents were aged 18-44. People in different stages use emojis with varying frequencies. Young people use emojis more frequently, almost every time they communicate online via WeChat. Middle-aged and elderly people use them less frequently, occasionally.

According to the survey questionnaire, people over 45 years old tend to choose static image emojis, emoji stickers, and dynamic text emojis. These static image emojis and dynamic image emojis are characterized by bright colors and straightforward meanings. The most distinctive feature is the "middle-aged and elderly emojis". "Middle-aged and elderly emojis" refer to those emoji images with neat and square design, larger font size, exaggerated bright colors, occasional sparkling features, and content mostly featuring scenic still life or joyful and lively images such as roses and toasting.

Young people use emojis or emoticons frequently, employing them in every communication and utilizing a wide variety of types. Middle-aged individuals use emojis less often, occasionally employing them and utilizing a smaller variety of emoticons. Elderly people use them very infrequently, almost never.

The research results indicate that people of different age groups have similar preferences

regarding the number of emojis sent at once, with specific data shown in "Figure 2". Generally, people of different age groups tend to send 1-2 emojis at a time, with a few young people choosing to send 3-5 emojis at a time, but the number is relatively small. "Sending 1-2 emojis at a time" is the mainstream habit: except for "self-made emojis by classmates", the proportion of "sending 1-2 emojis at a time" in the other five types of emojis exceeds 50%. For example, "homophonic emojis" account for 71.43%, and "cartoon images" account for 70.18%. The proportion of "0 uses" is extremely low: the proportion of "0 uses" for most emojis is below 10%. "Chinese character emojis" have a slightly higher proportion, at 16.67%. This indicates that these types of emojis are more popular. The usage habit of "homemade emojis by classmates" is more unique: the proportion of people who "send 3-5 emojis at a time" is 36.36%, the highest among all types. Meanwhile, the proportion of people who "send 1-2 emojis at a time" is relatively low, at 54.55%. This suggests that when using homemade emojis, people tend to send more.

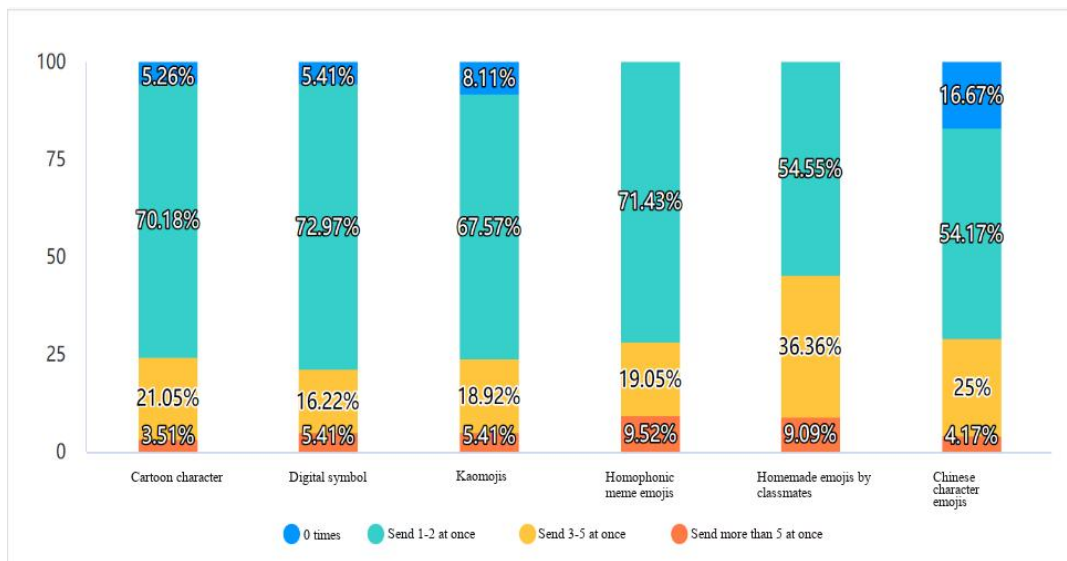


Figure 2 Specific data of different age groups' similar preferences regarding the number of emojis sent at once.

The research results indicate that most people generally choose to send 1-2 emojis at a time. The specific data is shown in "Figure 3". This article will analyze this set of data from three dimensions: group characteristics, proportion comparison, and overall trend. Firstly, "almost always use emojis in WeChat communication" accounts for 35.62%, which is the highest proportion: these are the "core dependent users" of emojis. Their WeChat communication cannot be separated from emojis, and they may use kaomojis to replace some text and enhance emotional expression. The number of "frequently use" users is 31.51%: "high-frequency regular users" - although they do not "use them every time", they frequently incorporate emojis into their daily WeChat chats. For example, they may

use emojis 3-5 times a day. The number of "occasionally use" users is 23.29%: "intermittent users", who only use emojis in specific scenarios and do not actively use them frequently. "Almost never use" accounts for 9.59%, which is the lowest proportion: "rarely use" users, whose WeChat communication is mainly based on pure text/voice, they almost never actively send emojis, possibly preferring direct and concise text expression.

This set of data reflects that emojis have become the "mainstream auxiliary tool" for communication on WeChat, with only a minority of users maintaining the habit of pure text/voice communication; meanwhile, there is a stratification in users' usage intensity, ranging from "using it every time" to "hardly ever using it".

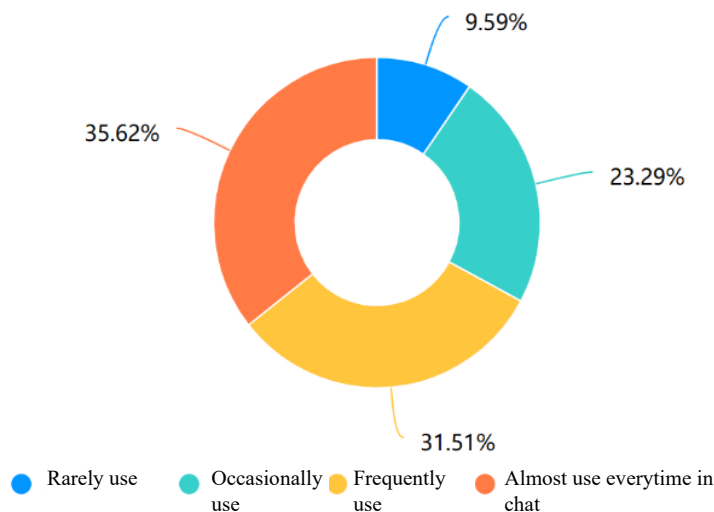


Figure 3 Frequency distribution of emoji using at a time in chat.

The questionnaire includes the popularity of different types of emojis, with specific data shown in "Figure 4". The data analysis is as follows: Cartoon images are the absolute mainstream, accounting for 78.08%, which is the highest acceptance rate. This indicates that users prefer vivid and universal cartoon-style expressions. Digital symbols and kaomojis are in the second tier, both accounting for 50.68%, exceeding half and belonging to the more commonly used types. These

types are concise and easy to understand, with a high degree of popularity. Chinese character emojis, homemade emojis by classmates, and homophonic emojis have a relatively low proportion. These three types account for 28.77%-32.88%, with homophonic emojis having the lowest proportion; these either require specific understanding costs (homophonic emojis) or are niche self-made (self-made by classmates), with relatively limited acceptance.

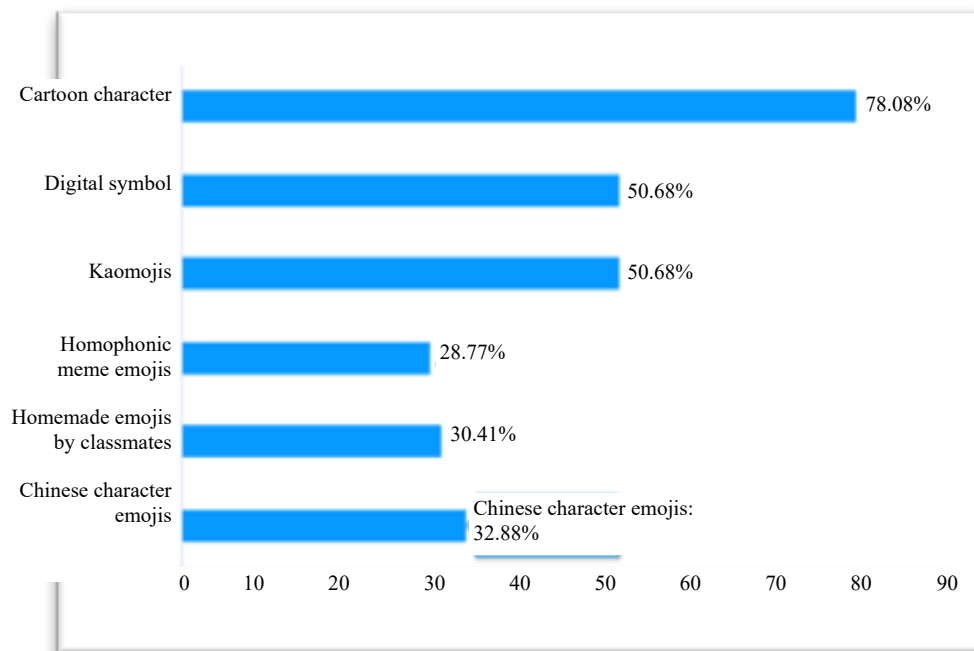


Figure 4 Popularity of different types of emojis.

The last question in this questionnaire is "What do you think are the benefits of using emojis?" According to the valid questionnaires, the research results show that most of the research subjects believe that the benefits of emojis are better expression of emotions, attitudes, or opinions. They believe that emojis can make the chat atmosphere more lively and vivid, and can better express emotions.

The subjects aged between 18 and 30 believe that emojis can better express themselves. Respondents aged between 40 and 50 consider emojis more suitable for greeting friends and colleagues. For those aged over 60, due to less exposure to the internet, most of them do not frequently use emojis, and they generally use them for communication with their children.

4.2 Reason Analysis

Results of research on the Motivations and Behaviors of College Students' Use of WeChat Emojis (He Wen) indicate that the motivations for college students to use WeChat emojis include expressive motivation, informational motivation, and entertainment motivation. This study verifies that college students' chat motivation is primarily expressive, followed by entertainment. In the communication of the younger generation, entertainment still plays a significant role. Emoticon communication makes people feel relaxed and easy to start a topic. The vigorous development of emojis in social networks has made their entertainment nature increasingly clear. When college students use WeChat emojis for social activities, they feel less psychological pressure, and the entertainment pleasure obtained from

communicating with emojis is no less than watching a comedy movie or reality show.

Over 70% of young people believe that emojis and symbols are very important, and the use of emojis by this group often conveys meanings such as expression, praise, and sarcasm. Conversely, the aesthetic appreciation of emojis among elderly users typically expresses sincere blessings and praises.

Elderly users mainly express that the audience still primarily relies on the relationship chains formed in reality under the interlude pattern. The primary reasons for elderly people using emojis are to maintain relationships, including those with their children, and to obtain information, such as greeting their children and reducing loneliness. After retirement and leaving mainstream society, elderly people may experience social isolation. Self-expression can help them reduce loneliness, enhance self-efficacy, and engage in leisure and entertainment through various means such as sending emojis in WeChat, expressing their interests in life, and killing time.

Most people aged between 30 and 50 are social workers who use emojis less frequently. This may be due to the more formal nature of their work groups, which are not suitable for using emojis or emoticons. Due to their long working hours, they have less time to communicate with family, friends, classmates, and colleagues, so they have fewer opportunities to use emojis.

5. INTERGENERATIONAL ANALYSIS

Based on the WHO age classification and questionnaire data distribution, this study divides the respondents into three categories: young people (18-44 years old, with the core group being 18-35 years old), middle-aged people (44-59 years old), and elderly people (over 59 years old). Combining questionnaire data, the analysis of intergenerational differences is conducted from three aspects: usage characteristics, usage purposes, and intrinsic causes.

Young people are the core group of this survey, accounting for the largest proportion. Their usage purposes are to more accurately express their emotions, attitudes, and opinions, while creating a relaxed and lively chat atmosphere, reducing social pressure, and facilitating topic initiation. As a generation that grew up with digital devices, young people have a high acceptance of the internet and deeply integrate it into their lives and social

interactions. According to the theory of usage satisfaction, the graphic and humorous attributes of emojis satisfy their core entertainment motivation, providing a sense of relaxation and happiness in social interactions. At the same time, the young group has a strong social demand, and rich emojis become an important tool for shaping self-image, seeking fun resonance, and narrowing emotional distance.

Compared to young people, middle-aged people use emojis less frequently; the types of usage are relatively simple, mainly static images, emojis, and dynamic text emojis, preferring bright colors and straightforward meanings. The number of emojis sent at once is consistent with other groups, mostly 1-2, with no obvious special performance. Their functional orientation is practical and concise. The formality of work scenarios limits their use of emojis; at the same time, longer working hours compress the communication time with others, thus lacking opportunities to use emojis. Their demand for emojis is more focused on basic communication assistance, rather than entertainment or deep social interaction.

The elderly group accounts for 20.55% of valid questionnaires, and this group is the one with the lowest frequency of emoji usage, with most people "almost not using" them. The types of usage are mainly static image emojis and emojis, with typical representatives being "middle-aged and elderly emojis" - these emojis are designed with square shapes, large fonts, and exaggerated bright colors, with content mostly being landscapes and still lifes, festive elements (such as roses, toasting), and some with flashing characteristics. The number of emojis sent at once is always 1-2, with no multiple sending. The core purpose of most elderly people using emojis is to maintain parent-child relationships, often used for greeting and expressing blessings when communicating with their children, while using emojis for simple leisure entertainment, expressing personal interests, and alleviating social isolation and loneliness after retirement.

Nowadays, it is the era of the Internet. Although everyone has a mobile phone, the elderly are less influenced by the popularization of the Internet, and their acceptance and familiarity with emerging network symbols are lower. They tend to prefer emojis with straightforward meanings and high visual recognition, and their social relationship chains are still dominated by real-life relationships. Their online communication needs are concentrated on core relatives. The use of emojis is more a

means to adapt to the communication style of younger generations and maintain emotional connections, rather than an active social or entertainment demand.

In summary, all three groups use cartoon-style emojis, and the number of emojis sent at one time is generally 1-2, reflecting the universality of emojis as a basic communication tool. There are intergenerational differences in the use of emojis among different groups, mainly reflected in usage frequency, variety of types, and intrinsic motivation. The youth group has "entertainment and social interaction" as the core motivation, using them frequently and diversely; the middle-aged group is oriented towards "practical communication", using them infrequently and succinctly; the elderly group aims at "maintaining emotional connections", using them extremely infrequently and with fixed types. This difference is essentially the result of the combined effects of different age groups' living scenarios, social needs, and degree of Internet exposure, reflecting the deep binding of online communication behavior and intergenerational life characteristics.

6. CONCLUSION

This study draws the following conclusions:

- People of different age groups use different types of emojis. Young people use a wide variety of emojis, middle-aged people tend to use a more limited range, and the elderly do not use emojis as frequently.
- The commonality of people of different age groups using emojis is that they all tend to use cartoon images and generally post 1 to 2 emojis at a time, with a minority choosing to post 3 to 5 emojis at once.
- People of different age groups have similar purposes for using emojis, generally to express themselves and make chatting more interesting, but their internal reasons vary.

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