

# *A Study of Young People Aged 15-25 Use Different Emojis Depending on the Recipient*

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**Abstract.** With the rise of the Internet, emojis play an important role in social media applications in our lives. The topic of our study is whether young people between the ages of 15 and 25 use different emojis depending on who they are communicating with. We used quantitative research methods to collect data about the use of social media emojis by this group of young people aged 15-25. In this study, it was found that about 68% of young respondents use different emojis depending on the group of people they are receiving them from, adjusting their use of emojis because older people may not understand emojis, fear of offending, or fear of others misunderstanding them, which suggests that they are aiming to try to match the audience's preferences as closely as possible so that they can more quickly understand what others are trying to convey. Secondly, when using emojis, young people will choose to use funny, cute, and exaggerated emojis with their friends and will prefer more formal and polite emojis with older people or on formal occasions, which shows that young respondents are conscious of choosing appropriate emojis according to who they are chatting with as well as the situation. The most unexpected result of this study was that face-to-face communication is becoming less and less common among young respondents, with digital communication methods dominating their lives. In addition, through the study, it is not difficult to find that emojis occupy an important position in the 15-25 young people's group. It enriches the way people communicate and convey their emotions. The small sample size of this study and the carelessness of individual fillers resulted in individual inaccuracies in the results, which will be strengthened in the future by increasing the sample size and diversifying the sample collection methods.

**Keywords:** Emoticons use adjustments, Social contact, Modern communication styles, Emotional expression

## 1. Introduction

With the rise of the Internet, social media has gradually become a platform for us to express ourselves, share our lives, and entertain ourselves. Social media is becoming more and more

functional and technologically perfect, and communication is becoming more and more convenient and easy. Emojis are gradually appearing among the public, and more and more people will use them. The history of emojis can be traced back to 1982 when the ASCII “:-)” character was first typed on an electronic bulletin board by Prof. Scott Elliott Fahlman of Carnegie Mellon University in the U.S.A. to indicate a smiley-face emotion, which is considered to be the first symbolic emojis in the history of humanity[1]. With the popularization of the Internet, a series of more complex emojis gradually evolved. Nowadays, emojis are no longer limited to the form of text characters but have evolved into the form of emojis that contain pictures and even moving images. In the text, we refer to all forms of emoticons as emojis.

The use of emojis increases the emotional and dynamic nature of the text, bringing them closer to each other, making the text that may have been difficult to understand better readable, and better conveying the emojis and feelings to be expressed to each other. However, there are times when the sending of emojis can cause misunderstandings, such as when the same emojis are displayed in different systems due to different cell phone systems and when the same emoji is displayed in other systems because of the deviation in looks.

This paper examines and discusses various aspects of whether adolescents between the ages of 15 and 25 use different emojis depending on who they are receiving. This study mainly researched through questionnaires to find answers to the questions.

## 2. Literature review

In recent years, emojis have become a hot research topic in the field of media, and since 2015, the number of papers has gradually increased and reached the top in 2017-2019[2]. The research on emojis involves a variety of fields, such as psychology, marketing, linguistics, etc. Many papers provide comprehensive summaries and analyses of emojis, focusing on the diversity of cultures and platforms on the use of emojis, the role and impact of emojis, as well as their properties and characteristics in communication. Research on whether young people aged 15-25 use different emojis depending on the recipient. Scholars generally agree that the choice and use of emojis are influenced by the recipient. Different social contacts (such as friends, family, and classmates) affect people’s choice of different emojis to communicate information and express emojis.

### 2.1. Emojis in digital communication

Emojis have been described as the equivalent of the nonverbal aspects of face-to-face communication- facial expressions and gestures relating to the delivery of emotion and intent[3]. Thus, when emojis are integrated into text-based communication, this gap is filled in the absence of such cues; ambiguity is reduced, and messages get richer[4]. Such increased emotional expressiveness in digital communication is related to improved interpersonal relationships and satisfaction[5].

### 2.2. Age and emoji usage

Chen et al.[6] studied emoji usage across different age groups and found that younger individuals, particularly those aged 15–25, are more adept and frequent users of emojis compared to older demographics. Prada et al.[7] studied the behavior of digital natives and found that growing up with technology, this age group is comfortable expressing their emotions, establishing identity, and developing social connections with emojis. On the other hand, Kaye et al. [8] conducted a study on

emoji usage by older adults and discovered that they use emojis less frequently, probably interpreting them in a different way, which might cause several misunderstandings.

### **2.3. Contextual factors influencing emoji use**

Kelly and Watts[9] explored how contextual factors influence emoji usage and found that the use of emojis is highly dependent on factors such as the communication platform, the relationship between communicators, and the nature of the conversation. Rodrigues[10] explored how individuals adjusted using emojis between different social contexts. He showed that the use of emojis varies between subjects based on norms and expectations within different settings. Li et al. [11] studied how people use emojis in personal and professional contexts. In their findings, they found that people used more informal, expressive emojis in conversations with friends, whereas in professional or formal contexts would prefer minimal or conservative emoji expressions.

### **2.4. Recipient influence on emoji selection**

Schroeder and Epley[12] investigated the role of the recipient's identity in determining emoji usage and found that individuals tailor their communication style, including emoji selection, to align with the recipient's preferences and the nature of their relationship. For example, Cheng[13] did investigate the sensitivity to recipient dynamics of young adults. Indeed, from this study, he established that these people do make adjustments in emoji use with the goal of increasing clarity and avoiding possible misinterpretation. They might use playful or affectionate emojis with close peers while opting for neutral or formal emojis when communicating with authority figures or elders.

### **2.5. Emojis and social relationships**

Riordan[14] investigated the impacts of emojis on social relationships and found that emojis were critical to maintaining and developing one's social relationships because of the facilitation of emotional expression and relational intent. In a study conducted by Derks et al.[4], it was investigated as to how emojis provide users with an avenue to express subtleties like sarcasm, humor, or affection whose fine shades meant everything in establishing rapport and fostering closeness. Gesselman et al.[5] investigated the strategic use of emojis and discovered that it can enhance social presence and relational closeness, especially in online environments where nonverbal cues are limited.

### **2.6. Cultural and platform variations**

Park et al.[15] examined the influence of cultural factors on emoji interpretation and found that differences in cultural norms and communication styles lead to varied understandings of the same emoji. Yuki et al.[16] examined emotional perception in Eastern and Western cultures, finding evidence that such cultures focus attention on different facial features when interpreting emotions, thereby extending their way of perceiving emojis. Miller et al.[17] investigated the platform and device issues that give rise to variations in emoji design and presentation, and they did find that these variations can have implications of altering intended meaning and, therefore lead to miscommunication.

## 2.7. Gaps in existing research

Despite the growing body of literature on emoji usage, there is a notable gap concerning how young adults adjust their emoji use based on the recipient. While studies acknowledge that context and recipient characteristics affect communication styles[8], there is limited research focusing specifically on the 15–25 age group and their strategic adaptation of emoji use in different relational contexts.

## 2.8. Recent research developments

Recent studies have begun to explore the ways in which emojis are employed as a means of communication. For example, Stark and Crawford[18] have explored how emojis contribute to the conservatism of digital communication, underlining their reinforcement of social norms. Highfield and Leaver[19], meanwhile, have examined emoji use for identity building on social networking sites, underlining the importance of self-presentation among young people.

Also, research by Jaeger[20] explores the emotive effect of emojis on relationships between consumers and brands. His work referenced how emojis can influence perceptions and ET. These diverse studies reveal a range of roles for emojis in digital communication; however, they usually overlook adjustments young adults make according to the recipient.

## 3. Methodology

In this study, a quantitative research method was used, and we collected a total of almost 100 questionnaires by distributing the questionnaires through the Internet. After collecting the data from almost 100 questionnaires, we closed the channel of completing the questionnaires. We created questionnaires and collected data through the app “wjx.” We distributed the questionnaires on our web page and circle of friends and forwarded them online to family, friends, etc.

We collected the public's use of social media platforms as well as emojis, then filtered out the 15-25-year-olds, compared the 15-25-year-olds with other age groups, and finally, targeted in-depth research and discussion on whether the 15-25-year-old group would use different emojis depending on the recipient. We set some questions in the beginning part of the questionnaire to gather the respondents' basic information, which can better identify them. In the middle part, we set questions that can help to know the respondents' use of social media, such as what platforms they use, how long they use them, what activities they do on the platforms, and so on. Then, we combine the use of social media platforms with the use of emojis to understand the situation, which helps to lead to a more directly related to the thesis gradually, provide more ideas for our research, and finally, to understand the use of emojis by the respondents and their views on emojis, which helps us to find out more from the survey.

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate whether adolescents aged 15-25 years old use different emojis depending on the object and to study the reasons behind it to find out the answer to the question.

## 4. Analysis and results

### 4.1. Demographic profile of respondents

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents

Characteristics	15-25 Age Group (n=60)	26 and Above (n=40)	Total (N=100)
Gender			
Male	33 (55%)	22 (55%)	55 (55%)
Female	27 (45%)	18 (45%)	45 (45%)
Education Level			
High School or Below	15 (25%)	11 (27.5%)	26 (26%)
Vocational Training	15 (25%)	8 (20%)	23 (23%)
University Degree	25 (42%)	20 (50%)	45 (45%)
Postgraduate Degree	5 (8%)	1 (2.5%)	6 (6%)

Note: Percentages are within each age group.

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of respondents, including gender and education level, which illustrates that the survey respondents are mainly high school (26%) and college students (45%). Our sample size is young, ranging from 15 to 25 years old, so they are still in school. Besides, gender is random.

### 4.2. Preferred social media platforms and activities

The study reveals distinct preferences in social media platform usage and activities between the younger and older age groups.

Individuals aged 15-25 predominantly use Douyin and Xiaohongshu, with 75% and 70% usage respectively. In contrast, those aged 26 and above prefer Kuaishou, with a 70% usage rate. In addition, the most common activities among the 15-25 age group are liking content (80%) and commenting using text (70%) and emojis (60%). For those aged 26 and above, liking content is also prevalent (85%), but there is a significant drop in commenting with emojis (20%).

### 4.3. Types of emojis usage and used with different audiences

Table 2: Frequency of emoji use with different audiences

Audience	Always/Often Use Emojis (15-25 Age Group)	Always/Often Use Emojis (26+ Age Group)
Friends	48 (80%)	10 (25%)
Family	30 (50%)	8 (20%)
Older Individuals	15 (25%)	6 (15%)
Colleagues/Classmates	42 (70%)	12 (30%)

Table 3: Types of emojis used with different audiences

Audience	A Funny (%)	B Cute (%)	C Formal/ Polite (%)	D Sarcastic (%)	E Impolite (%)	F Exaggerated (%)	G Other (%)	H Don't Use Emojis (%)
Friends	20%	18.1%	16.19%	14.29%	8.57%	15.24%	7.62%	0%
Family	15.24%	9.52%	19.05%	10.48%	15.24%	18.1%	12.38%	0%
Older Individuals	17.14%	13.33%	20%	3.81%	12.38%	20%	13.33%	0%
Colleagues/ Classmates	14.29%	15.24%	20%	11.43%	19.05%	13.33%	6.67%	0%

Table 2 shows the frequency of emoji use with different audiences. Young individuals frequently use emojis when communicating with friends (80%) and classmates (70%), but the frequency decreases when interacting with family (50%) and older individuals (25%). In contrast, older adults have a low frequency of emoji usage across all audiences. Table 3 shows how emoji preferences differ when communicating with various audiences, such as friends, family, older individuals, and colleagues or classmates.

The preference for different types of emojis in various contexts reflects an understanding of social appropriateness. When engaging with older individuals or in professional contexts, the usage of formal and polite emojis increases significantly (20%) to convey respect and maintain decorum. Young people are mindful of the potential for miscommunication, especially with older individuals who may not share the same familiarity with emoji culture.

Responding to a partner through a combination of text and emojis builds a higher level of closeness[21], and young people are likely to consider the preferences and communication style of the person they are interacting. If they know that the other person enjoys emojis and uses them frequently, they may be more inclined to use them in their messages, which strengthens communication within the platform as well as maintains and enhances social relationships[14]. Our research result is consistent with the findings of 2016 and 2017. This suggests a social awareness and sensitivity to appropriateness when choosing emojis based on the audience. The younger demographic predominantly uses funny and cute emojis when communicating with friends in order to foster a sense of camaraderie and shared humor. However, they use formal and polite emojis with older individuals to convey respect and maintain decorum.

#### 4.4. Proportion and reasons for adjusting emoji use

Table 4: The proportion of changing the use of emoticons based on the different recipients(15-25 age group, n=60)

Response	% of Respondents	% of Respondents
Yes	51	85%
No	9	15%
I don't use emojis	0	0

Table 4 shows the proportion of changing the use of emoticons based on the different recipients. It reveals that maximum of 85% of the respondent say that they do change their use of emojis based on the recipient. Only 15% of the respondents indicating they do not.

Table 5: Reasons for adjusting emoji use (15-25 age group, n=60)

Reason	No. of Respondents	% of Respondents
Elders may not understand emojis	42	70%
Fear of offending	36	60%
Fear of misinterpretation	30	50%
To fit in with peers	25	42%
To shape one's image	20	33%

Table 5 shows reasons for adjusting emoji use, such as elders may not understand emojis, fear of offending, fear of misinterpretation, to fit in with peers, and to shape one's image. While emojis have visual similarities, its interpretation is influenced by cultural context, technological differences and its own visual characteristics[23]. Our research findings confirm this viewpoint. The primary concern among young users is that elders may not comprehend emojis, leading to miscommunication (70% of respondents). This indicates a generational gap in digital literacy and familiarity with emoji language. The fear of offending or being misunderstood further influences their decision to adjust emoji usage based on the audience (60% and 50% of respondents, respectively). These reasons mainly stem from cultural differences, communication styles, and varying levels of understanding among different audience groups.

The adjustment of emoji usage based on the audience demonstrates social awareness and adaptability. Research by Berengueres and Castro[23] indicated that there are differences in the understanding of emojis, and for the same negative emoji, there can be a 26 % difference in the emotional feelings of the sender and the receiver. So, the younger demographic adjusts their emoji usage based on the audience. They aim to avoid any conflicts or discomfort hence they may choose to avoid using emojis when communicating with different audience groups.

#### 4.5. Perceived benefits of using emojis

Table 6: Perceived benefits of emojis (15-25 age group, n=60)

Benefit	No. of Respondents	% of Respondents
Conveying emotions	48	80%
Expressing information accurately	45	75%
Increasing interest/fun	36	60%
Enhancing communication efficiency	30	50%
Closing social distance	24	40%

Table 6 shows loads of benefits when using emojis. A significant majority of young respondents recognize emojis as valuable tools for conveying emotions (80%) and expressing information more accurately (75%). Emojis seem to be a simple and intuitive way to express emotions[5], which in turn improves the efficiency of online communication, provides emotional value to the user, and makes interactions more enjoyable.

Emojis can help users strategically and dynamically choose the best way to express their emotions, opinions, or intentions to achieve communication fluency[24]. This is particularly important in an era where digital interactions often replace face-to-face conversations. According to

our research, it can be concluded that emojis play a crucial role for young people in connecting and enhancing communication. Firstly, young individuals are inclined towards visual perception and are adept at interpreting images and symbols. Emojis serve as visual representations of emotions, expressions, and reactions, enriching text-based conversations. By incorporating this visual element, emojis effectively convey tones and emotions that are sometimes difficult to express through written words, making communication more engaging and meaningful. Secondly, emojis have evolved into a universal language that transcends cultural and linguistic barriers. Regardless of their backgrounds or native languages, young people can utilize emojis to communicate and understand emotions, thus diminishing the reliance on verbal expressions alone. This shared visual communication fosters deeper connections and mutual understanding among individuals, helping bridge cultural divides. In essence, emojis act as a visual aid that elevates communication, facilitates emotional expression, nurtures cultural empathy, strengthens social bonds among youth, bridges communication disparities, and cultivates more appealing and relevant interactions. Hence, it confirms that our previous viewpoint is consistent with other researcher[24].

#### 4.6. Importance of emojis on social media platforms

Table 7: Importance of emojis on social media platforms (15-25 age group, n=60)

Platform	Always Use Emojis (%)	Occasionally Use Emojis (%)	Never Use Emojis (%)
Xiaohongshu	30(50%)	25(41.66%)	5(8.33%)
Douyin	35(58.3%)	17(28.33%)	8(13.33%)
WeChat	40(66.66%)	15(25%)	5(8.33%)
QQ	20(33.33%)	25(41.66%)	15(25%)
Kuaishou	15(25%)	20(33.33%)	25(41.66%)
Weibo	14(23.33%)	25(41.66%)	21(35%)

Table 7 shows the responses regarding how often individuals use emojis across different platforms. The majority of respondents occasionally use emojis, with usage rates above 50% on all platforms. Emojis appear to play a substantial role, especially on platforms like Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and WeChat. WeChat has the highest percentage of users who always use emojis (66.66%), as its diverse emoji selection makes it convenient for users to express themselves accurately and engage in fun and interactive conversations?

Platform diversity is one of the most important factors influencing emoji use, and the presentation style or structure of emojis on different social platforms affects users' preferred choice of emojis[2]. Emojis add a layer of emotion and cultural resonance to communication on the platform, enhancing the overall social experience for users. Users have unique preferences when using emojis on different platforms[2], enhancing the connection and communication between users with different platforms. Through our investigation results, we found that the relationship between the popularity of platforms and the frequency of using emojis can be seen in the following aspects. To begin with, the enhanced user experience and functionality offered by popular platforms encourage increased communication and interaction among users which heightened engagement often leads to greater use of emojis as a means to express emotions, inject humor, and enrich communication content, thereby amplifying the platform's appeal and interactivity. Additionally, the broad spectrum of user demographics attracted to popular platforms fosters a more diverse and enriched communication environment. Embracing emojis as a tool for accommodating various user preferences and

expression styles has become a prevailing practice in this context. Finally, popular platforms drive the prevalence of emoji usage, while user demand for emojis spurs platforms to introduce additional features and resources that cater to users' emotional expression and communication needs. To sum up, our conclusion also confirms this viewpoint.

#### 4.7. Influence of receiving emojis on perception of the sender

Table 8: Changes in perception due to receiving emojis(15-25 age group, n=60)

Option	Count	Percentage
Frequently Changes	10	16.66%
Sometimes Changes	25	41.66%
Rarely Changes	6	10%
Never Changes	9	15%
Total Respondents	60	100%

Table 9: Impressions formed based on emojis usage(15-25 age group, n=60)

Impression	Count	Percentage
Funny	35	33.33%
Interesting	66	62.86%
Outgoing	57	54.29%
Warm	41	39.05%
Reliable	32	30.48%
Confident	14	13.33%
Rational	11	10.48%
Cute	5	4.76%
Lively	2	1.9%
Optimistic	4	3.81%
Dismissive	3	2.86%
Aloof	5	4.76%
Introverted	2	1.9%
Other	11	10.48%

Table 8 shows how often respondents' perception of a message sender changes upon receiving emojis. Table 9 shows impressions formed about a person when they use emojis in their messages.

Emojis can be used for strategic motives such as self-presentation, impression management, establishing social presence, and maintaining social status[25]. A large proportion of respondents (41.66%) indicated that receiving emojis sometimes alters their impression of the sender. The majority of respondents associate emoji use with positive traits such as being interesting (62.86%) and outgoing (54.29%). This suggests that the use of emojis is also related to interpersonal relationships[26], and emojis can contribute to forming favorable perceptions in social interactions. However, a small proportion also associate emoji use with dismissiveness or aloofness, indicating that inappropriate or excessive use could lead to negative impressions

A smaller percentage frequently change their perception based on emoji usage because emojis are just one element of communication, and while they may have a short-term impact on impressions,

they are usually not enough to cause frequent changes in impressions. Impressions are formed through a combination of factors, including language, behavior, attitude, and other aspects.

## 5. Interpretation and discussion of findings

The aim of this study was to investigate whether the young population aged 15-25 use emojis according to different recipients. This study found that approximately 68% of young respondents adjust their use of emojis based on the recipient. The reasons for adjusting emoji use are elders may not comprehend emojis and can not explain them well, and fear of offending or being misunderstood. This suggests a conscious effort to tailor communication to suit the audience's preferences and understanding. Another finding is that when communicating with friends, young individuals prefer funny, cute, and exaggerated emojis. However, with elders or in formal contexts, they opt for formal and polite emojis, which indicates an awareness of social norms and the appropriateness of certain expressions in different contexts.

It was not surprising to see that older adults use emojis less frequently, and when they do, it's often in a limited capacity. This contrasts sharply with the younger demographic's pervasive use of emojis across various communication platforms. However, one unanticipated result was that face-to-face communication has decreased. Less than half of the young respondents frequently engage in face-to-face communication. Digital communication methods, including messaging apps and social media, dominate their interactions.

As might be expected, young people use different emojis according to the target audience and emojis play a significant role in modern communication, serving as essential tools for expressing emotions, constructing self-identity[27], and enhancing the overall communication experience.

## 6. Conclusion

The method of collecting data through a survey questionnaire used in this study has certain limitations due to the small sample size and reliance on self-reported data. Some respondents may not have taken the survey seriously and just filled in the answers randomly, which may lead to insufficient sample representativeness. A small sample size will make the research results unable to show universality, limiting the conclusions that can be drawn. For future research, we could expand the sample size and include a more diverse range of participants to further validate the findings. We could also incorporate qualitative research methods to explore the underlying reasons for emoji usage patterns and how they affect interpersonal relationships and communication effectiveness.

In conclusion, this study shows that young people aged 15-25 use different emojis depending on the receiver. Emojis play an important role in the communication practices of 15-25-year-olds, which enrich communication between people. They are not only a tool for expressing emotions but also a means of understanding social relations and cultural norms. Young people aged 15-25 use different types of emojis when communicating online to quickly establish and maintain relationships with different recipients. The conscious adaptation of emojis according to the background and culture of the recipients suggests that each individual's understanding of emojis varies greatly, reflecting that emojis are very influential people's online behaviours and interaction patterns.

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