

CREATING COMMUNICATIVE CONTEXT THROUGH THE USE OF EMOJI AND POLITENESS IN ONLINE ACADEMIC WRITTEN INTERACTIONS

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Article history: Received 14 March 2024; Revised 28 May 2024; Accepted 09 September 2024; Available online 30 September 2024; Available print 30 September 2024.

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ABSTRACT. *Creating Communicative Context Through the Use of Emoji and Politeness in Online Academic Written Interactions.* The current study aims to provide a glimpse into the way higher education students and language instructors establish rapport in the academic written communication framework through the use of emoji and online face-work strategies. Contextualisation cues are created in order to regulate transaction based communicative exchanges that result in positive outcomes, subsequently fostering an inclusive culture. Linguistic display of online discourse is fraught with perils that may impede on appropriate written academic interactions occurring between instructors and students. Negotiation of identity becomes a main objective, as there are differences in status, power and various degrees of communicative achievement between interactants.

The study shares results obtained from a questionnaire administered to 92 Romanian undergraduate students offering a framework for embedding

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emoji and face-work in online identity negotiation via written communication. It aims to offer a digital pedagogical competence approach to cater for the emotional needs of learners whose identities as digital natives take additional effort to create in the context of using transversal skills. The main findings of the study suggest that emoji and face work enable foreign language students to better manipulate their self-image when communicating online.

Keywords: *identity negotiation, online linguistic discourse, emoji, pragmatic politeness, face-work strategies, written communication, context, social and emotional learning.*

REZUMAT. Crearea contextului comunicativ prin folosirea emoji și a politeții în interacțiuni scrise în mediul online academic. Studiul de față își propune să ofere o analiză a modului în care studenții și instructorii de limbă modernă din mediul academic stabilesc conexiuni în cadrul secvențelor de comunicare scrisă prin recurgerea la emoji și strategii de gestionare a imaginii de sine online (Engl. *Face-work*). Indiciile de contextualizare sunt folosite cu scopul de a regla secvențele comunicative tranzacționale asociate cu soluționări discursive pozitive, contribuind implicit la crearea unei culturi de tip inclusiv. Manifestările lingvistice ale discursului online sunt adeseori pline de substraturi potențial problematice care pot influența negativ comunicarea scrisă dintre profesori și studenți. Negocierea identității devine un obiectiv principal în contextul în care se conturează diferențe de status academic, putere decizională precum și niveluri diferite de performanță comunicativă din partea participanților.

Studiul de față prezintă rezultatele obținute în urma administrării unui chestionar online studenților din învățământul academic (92 de participanți dintr-o universitate românească, nivel licență), sugerându-se un cadru în care negocierea identității online în registrul scris include emoji și strategii de gestionare a imaginii de sine. Propunerea autorilor este aceea de a oferi o abordare pedagogică a competenței digitale care sprijină nevoile emoționale ale studenților ale căror identități de nativi digitali se conturează cu un efort suplimentar în contextul folosirii competențelor transversale.

Cuvinte-cheie: *negocierea identității, discurs online, emoji, politețe pragmatică, strategii de gestionare a imaginii de sine, comunicare scrisă, context, învățare socio-emoțională.*

Introduction

Communicative exchanges in the form of online written interaction between language instructors and learners are often subject to a variety of contextual cues, mindset induced communicative decisions, and trends that define students' identity as part of a class culture. Identity building and identity

negotiation are core features of this transactional encounter, in which instructors set the formality level and contextual framework of the interaction, whereas learners modulate their persona identities using filters of politeness and digital communication markers. Contextualisation cues consequently become a dynamic representation of an internal emotion-driven repertoire that attempts to further support and nuance the expected communicative academic achievement through nonverbal markers that may point to informed use of face management and face negotiation strategies. Written discourse exchanges consequently become a two-way multi-dimensional and multimodal display of resources used to invite collaborative interactions.

In order to regulate transaction based on communicative exchanges, various contextualisation cues are used with the interactional intention to facilitate an inclusive culture within the framework of social-emotional learning (SEL). In foreign language instruction, SEL can be a mechanism of fostering the participatory culture in class. (Jenkins et. al. 2006, 4) and building an affinity space. Additionally, studies have shown that students are bound to develop their cognitive ability in its association with physical, social, and emotional systems towards integration of both thinking and feeling patterns while activating in a group. (Zins et al. 2004)

Such inclusion can come via the Netspeak tools (emoji) and politeness management in building and adapting discourse that allows students to shape an identity matching their e-face and netizen sense of belonging in an otherwise impersonal environment that is devoid of in-real-time physical presence and reactions. More than constructing a sense of identity in the online and hybrid academic interaction framework, what makes the difference is the actual negotiation of identity, with marring differences in status, power and various degrees of communicative achievement between interactants.

Digitally maintaining and saving *face* is a complex process as it involves heightened awareness of one's intended impact, informed acknowledgement of interactants' needs and wants, as well as successfully compensating for the varied range of nonverbal/paralinguistic features that naturally occur in face-to-face communication (FtF). Repair discourse strategies become essential in providing much needed contextual information and cues in order to avoid miscommunication. In this context, one relevant direction of analysis is to identify how these features occur in CMC (*Computer Mediated Communication*), given that users do not find themselves in the physical proximity that would enable them to use the nonverbal cues toolkit. Research rooted in compensation strategies within a CMC context has analysed the use of digital cues such as emoticons and emoji documenting the particular ways in which they support rapports (Sampietro 2019, 110).

The present paper focuses on the pragmatic use of emoji within foreign language instruction connecting it with the face saving politeness strategies.

Blending the two elements may require an additional marked communicative effort on behalf of students to be both accepted and autonomous. An additional focus lies on illustrating how the embedding of emoji alongside CMC cues may enhance online communication serving a face-management function.

Theoretical Framework

Emoji and their linguistic functions

Student engagement in academic education is heavily dependent on creating a class culture that is conducive to a safe representation of *self* through language use and context appropriation by factoring in cognitive, socio-cultural, affective as well as behavioural elements that have become increasingly connected to generational and distinctive cultural markers. This reality, in turn, has been connected to students' need and strive for interconnectedness as a collective within academic settings. (Kahn, Everington, Kelm, Reid, and Watkins 2017, 216-218).

Digital media are rapidly reconfigured whereas academic content tends to be negotiated and critically processed rather than merely intermediated to university students who are more empowered to include their nonformal education into the academic equation than ever before. Consequently, students' face-work practices are changing (Virtanen, Tuija, and Lee 2018) an aspect that may be perceived as a generation Z unique representation of communicative priorities and dismissive efficiency regarding discursive acts completion. Our contention is that *emerging changes* such as the ones listed above may be successfully incorporated into a pedagogical framework that includes on the one hand *emoji-the digital counterparts of nonverbal cues*- that shelter affective, inferential and social responses in CMC (Erle, Schmid, Goslar, and Martin 2022). On the other hand, attention is given to *face-work politeness* (i.e. at awareness and practice level) for the complete reinforcement of learners' online identity and presence.

Communicative exchanges in written digital contexts stem from a recognition and, more importantly, a constant negotiation of personas' identities. Given that "people construct and negotiate their identity each time when they communicate using a new language" (Herzua 2018, 99-119), in the context of such interactions mediated by the higher education framework and more particularly, in the realm of a teacher-student type of interaction, identity negotiations may be molded by the integration of emoji and face management strategies. Language use, as the "form of self-presentation" (Miller 2004, 293)

by which it is not merely information that is transmitted in a communicative exchange, but also an identity attachment occurs, thus pertains to sketching a negotiation of identities and to contextualising such interaction.

Extensive body of research (as shown below) has claimed that the basic feature of emoji (and emoticons) is to carefully construct and express affective meaning. Being used as substitute for facial expressions or face-to-face nonverbal cues (Sarkar et al. 2017, 28-30) these digital affective meaning driven symbols enable communicators to express emotional engagement and overall communicative interest, which in itself is a major gain irrespective of the transmitted positive or negative nuances. Emoji and “emoticons are text-based representations of *face* in text based CMC” (Togans, Holtgraves, Kwon et al. 2021, 278), functioning as textual utterances in CMC (Danesi 2016; Ge and Herring 2018). Moreover, “users select and use emoji as linguistic elements to express their ‘textual voice’ and community recognized personality and also to encourage their audiences for being discourse participants” (Ge-Stadnyk and Jing 2019, 428).

Encompassing various forms such as email, instant messaging, social media, and video conferencing, computer-mediated communication (CMC) serves as a crucial tool for interpersonal communication, in synchronous and asynchronous communication modes. CMC cues include a variety of elements, ranging from textual cues (words, punctuation, emoji, emoticons, capitalisation) to visual cues (avatars, profile pictures, graphics), auditory and temporal cues (auditory notifications that can enhance the sense of immediacy, as well as response latency and timestamps). Additionally, CMC also encompasses a series of cues meant to facilitate interaction, stemming from feedback mechanisms, to social cues such as greetings and politeness markers to nonverbal cues, including memes, GIFs, audio-video clips with the intent of assigning layers of meaning. All these cues impact interpersonal affinity in text-based interactions. They influence conversation duration, perceived affinity, and reciprocity, especially when interlocutors can see each other's cues, allowing users to convey emotions, reactions, and nuances in their messages.

Miscommunication avoidance, status recognition and identity building become core features of a communicative exchange in which emoji are embedded, particularly when the interlocutor is a student, striving to account for both language use and communicative purpose achievement. Serving a “prescriptive purpose, indicating intentions for interpretation” emoji (and emoticons) “are frequently used as a semiotic tactic to refine the meaning and tenor that a sender would like to convey with a word or message, seeking to calibrate the word in order to reduce the possibility of its being misinterpreted” (Ge-Stadnyk and Jing 2019, 430).

Referring to Paivio's dual coding theory (1971), according to which better information processing occurs when multiple codes of representation are embedded in the message, the blend of visual elements and Netspeak characteristics, "as a blend between speech, writing and electronically-mediated features" (Crystal 2006, 48) in written interaction favours visual support via emoji. The dual coding of information via the written interaction among actors of the language class micro-community relies on the rationale that the language class may be sketched according to participatory culture principles, "in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another. [...] Participatory culture shifts the focus of literacy from one of individual expression to community involvement" (Jenkins et al. 2006, 4).

Li (2019) makes reference to a set of linguistic functions of emoji, which vary from expressing certain feelings during online interactions, to taking on the role of pictorial cues, to conveying tone and strength in writing, as politicons (10) or as modes of artistic expression.

"In the field of communication, research on emoji mainly focuses on two aspects: one is emoji's emotional and linguistic functions in CMC, the other is how different factors, such as individual characteristics, cultural background and system platform, influence users' preferences for emoji use" (Bai et. al. 2019).

In the educational framework and particularly in language learning and teaching, studies have analysed and confirmed the effective impact of using emoji in education-focused interactions. Bai (et. al.)'s (2019) review referred to the scarcity of research related to emoji use effectiveness in language teaching and language learning. Nonetheless, the studies that do analyse this impact mention the "potential of emoji for language classes as a means of overcoming language barriers [...] as a mechanism of facilitating more genuine communication in online interactions and as awareness triggers regarding the non-verbal features of communication" (Mudure-Iacob 2022, 279).

Contextualising communication rapport building in written interactions among language instructors and students, two positionings must be mentioned. On the one hand, the camp positioned against recurrent use of emoji in communication mirrors the embedding of emoji in written communication to dark age illiteracy. This perspective indicates that emoji, along with humour and sarcasm, are viewed as negative cues in the politeness filter and therefore alter the meaning of the message. Moreover, emoji are often blamed for causing difficulty in discourse participants attempt to *put feelings into words*. On the other hand, a positive perspective on the use of emoji in written communication claims that emoji bring along various linguistic functions and enhance the expression of interlocutors' emotional selves (Evans 2017, 67).

Employed as carriers of linguistic utterance features, emoji are considered to be filling a slot in written communication, by providing substitutes for the lack of intonation and pitch and enhancing the phatic communication function. Given that “language learners are multiliterate actors whose interaction in an online environment is improved if the participatory culture is built” (Mudure-Iacob 2022, 281), discursive membership paired with contextualisation cues becomes a core feature of written interactions. Phatic communication “in interaction, constitutes the use of language and/or paralinguistic to create ties of union, where this purpose takes precedence over transmitting information” (Aull 2019, 210). The tailoring of online identities in written communication as an extended framework of the language class is illustrative for building an inclusive culture, as certain facets of one’s *face* can be substituted for emoji in online instruction-led platforms.

Furthermore, the relevance of emoji in written interactions is highly related to the concept of code-switching (Duah and Marije 2013, 3-5), a core element of language proficiency also emphasized in the new CEFR. Emphasis is now placed not on native speech, but rather on code-switching as a cue of communicative and linguistic skills. Code-switching can further be explored by how emoji occur along written communication in formal and semi-formal communication in academic interaction via platforms, emails and posts both among learners and teacher-learners.

Politeness as Face-work

There is extensive research to date on the manifestations and applications of the construct of *face* undertaken by communication experts within the field of interpersonal communication and rapport management theories with a focus on improving the quality of communicative exchanges that have a mutually beneficial transactional value. (Spencer-Oatey 2000, 2008, 2013, 2015; Arundale 2020; Locher 2014, Culpeper 2011; House, Kadar 2023).

In order to better serve the purpose of the present study, we intend to connect *face* and face-work to the interconnectedness that arises from knowledgeable awareness and applications of *face* and pragmatic politeness strategies in students’ written language production in foreign language instruction via emoji use as a compensation tool for lending a textual voice and nonverbal tonality to language production.

As stated before, CMC has influenced face-work practices to an important extent (Virtanen, Tuija, and Lee 2018). Foreign language instruction and communication courses inherently invite context appropriate, conscious decisions that are made in order to digitally project, maintain, save, and enhance one’s (e)-face/projected self-image. Consequently, it has become increasingly important

to acknowledge that pragmatic politeness applications can improve one's online identity and presence as it brings into focus the need for a mutual negotiation and consideration of participants' discursive wants and needs.

Pragmatic politeness owes its conceptualisations and various applications within the field of foreign language instruction to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theoretical framework, which shaped the science and art of linguistic politeness theory by putting forward a series of politeness principles and strategies for maintaining and enhancing one's face (i.e. public self-image) during social encounters. At the very core of politeness research lies the construct of *face* which is famously defined as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (Brown and Levinson 1987, 61). Brown and Levinson's definition of the intricate construct of face and its multifaceted manifestations in collaborative communication has emerged and developed from sociologist Erving Goffman (1955, 1967) for whom *face-work* refers to "the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face" (1967, 12). *Face* -according to Goffman- is the "*positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact.*" (Goffman 1967, 5). Goffman analysed the construct of face adapting it from the world of dramaturgy and theatre, having been interested in the nuances it contributes to human interactions and exchanges whose interlocutors negotiate communicative needs for gaining leverage in accomplishing mutually beneficial transactions.

Face is a construct that is fundamental in pragmatics encompassing a variety of glocal practices and manifestations that received increased attention from scholars as a pillar in identity construction and impression management theories in computer-mediated communication (Locher et al. 2015). *E-face* has become the currency for projecting and maintaining one's self-image and self-worth in communication exchanges that are devoid of face-to-face contexts. There are two interrelated aspects of face that are essential to highlight as they are relevant to the present study. One is the *positive face* (Brown and Levinson 1987, 101). Positive face is rooted in individuals' fundamental strive for involvement, overall connection, and acceptance from others, the so-called *solidarity face* (Scollon and Scollon 2014) that primarily informs discourse participants need for being approved of in interactions. The other is the *negative face*, the facet associated with one's autonomy and freedom from imposition (Brown and Levinson 1987, 61). As in face-to-face interactions, participants pose questions, asking for clarifications and instructions, negotiating misunderstandings, displaying agreement and disagreement. Such interaction may consequently pose a threat to discourse participants' face, or public self-image. Discourse participants therefore communicate and share communicative meaning while engaging in face-work (i.e. showing a marked interest in the development, preservation and enhancement of self-image) based on a cognitive assessment of contextual and interpersonal variables such as power distance, degree of

imposition or social distance among discourse participants. Politeness strategies include verbal and nonverbal manifestations encompassing the claiming of common ground: shared interest and knowledge with other discourse participants, seeking agreement and avoiding overt disagreement, delivering compliments, showing interest and approval, etc. In online instruction, face-work is a tool students have in projecting a self-image that they work on constantly, it is their storytelling approach to academic stance and identity (Micle, 2020, 21). Within the realm of technologically enhanced and mediated communication, in recent years in particular, emphasis has been placed on the newly emerged need to understand how new affordances of online media impact face-work and politeness norms (Locher et al. 2015).

'One of the reasons to foreground pragmatic (im)politeness in CMC is to establish in what ways forms of computer-mediated communication differ from face-to-face interaction with respect to the restrictions that the medium imposes on relational work/face-work and the consequences of these restrictions on linguistic choices.'(Locher, 2010, 27)

Face-work is analysed in the broader sense of impression management, relational work as well as its direct manifestations through the use of emoji as a strategic move to replace nonverbal cues and nuances.

Research and Hypotheses

Participants and Procedure

A total of 92 undergraduate students in a Romanian university were involved in the study. They are in their B.A. and M.A. level of study with various majors (Pedagogy of Preschool and Primary School Education, Business Administration, International Business, Finance, E-Business, Auditing and Corporate Governance, Public Administration). The participants undergo undergraduate and graduate study programs in English such as: English applied to Economics, English applied to Public Administration or Intercultural Business Communication, while their language level of English was self-identified (based on DigComp testing as B1-B2 Independent user by 55.7%, C1-C2, Advanced level by 22.7 % and A1-A2 beginner level by 21.6% of respondents). 65.9% of participants were women, while the rest (34.1 %) identified as men.

Regarding the research procedure, the study is the result of the analysis conducted on a questionnaire including 19 questions, divided into four sections: demographic section, face/self-image management, emoji-based communication and message to the course instructor section, the last one being designed as a

practical task of showcasing the use of emoji in written messages directed at language instructors. The questionnaire was designed by the authors of the research for the purpose of the current study.

Participation was optional, personal data was confidential and the respondents gave their informed consent. Students' perceptions regarding use of emoji in written communication were observed with reference to exchanges that are complementary to their academic assignments as part of creation of collaborative CMC environments (i.e. online learning platforms/chat rooms, online forums put up for discussion of classroom materials and reflection handouts, online collaborative projects that require instructor-student interaction/feedback and peer-peer feedback sessions, apps, tools and e-resources used in order to communicate across traditional frontal teaching environments such as Padlet, Peardeck, Quizlet, Write & Improve, etc.). Content analysis was obtained from qualitative data, based on teachers' textual observation of students' emails and written interactions on educational platforms used during classes. Data from students' answers as well as their observed written interactions were analysed and visually transferred into graphs, pie charts and mindmaps designed by the authors and shown in section Results analysis.

Research hypotheses

Our research examined the following hypotheses:

1. Students' **sociointerpersonal stance** manifests itself through the use of emoji and politeness relational work strategies in online interactions.
2. **Emoji can be valid tools of contextualising online identity** in written semi-formal academic communication interactions both between language instructors and learners and among peers.
3. **Students' identity** is potentially created in CMC environments by impression management and relational work, fostering a participatory culture.

Results and Analysis

Hypothesis One: *Students' sociointerpersonal stance manifests itself through the use of emoji and politeness relational work strategies in online interactions.*

Sociointerpersonal stance in foreign language instruction and communication studies has taken a front seat in the context of SEL approaches to education, particularly with the emergence of a variety of tools and apps that support online/hybrid interactions. SEL (Social and Emotional Learning) focuses on enabling students to more effectively integrate skills/competences, communicative attitudes, and behaviours that would contribute to a sense of safety and overall wellbeing. According to the CASEL Model (Collaborative for

Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning 2012, 2015), there are five important elements that SEL consists of: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Considering such elements within the framework of academic education brings into focus the role affective factors play in language learning, as they constitute an essential predictor of student engagement and performance. According to Henter (2014), affective factors may include motivation, attitude, and anxiety and they affect language performance being also very much dependent on various opportunities for exposure.

There is not common agreement with reference to the definition of the construct of *stance* in communication although many researchers have analysed it within various fields of interest from sociology to social sciences and applied communication. Several researchers have significantly contributed to the sociointerpersonal dynamics study. Goffman (1967) was preoccupied with the way discourse participants present themselves in social interactions that occur daily with a focus on impression management whereas others such as Bandura (1977) primarily focused on how individuals develop certain social behaviours through modeling and observation. Consequently, Tannen (1990) further expanded her research interest on sociointerpersonal stance by highlighting the role gender plays in shaping one's interactional style. Within the present study, the construct of *socio interpersonal stance* refers to the way individuals approach communication while interacting with each other within various social and interpersonal contexts. This unique representation is influenced by such factors as communication style, behavioral and linguistic patterns as well as the communication skills set each participant possesses. Despite the above-mentioned lack of consensus to reach an encompassing definition of the construct, the majority of research approaches to stance do acknowledge one common core feature and that is the attempt to gain a more comprehensive grasp of both the social and pragmatic nature of language and the communicative functions served by language in interactions (Formentelli 2013).

This study has taken a look at students' sociointerpersonal stance through the lens of face-work strategies that language students resort to using in written interactions so as to have a positive impact. Politeness is an integral part of sociointerpersonal stance. Factors such as the need to promote a positive face, the need to maintain autonomy in interactions and be accepted as part of the group, the necessity to counteract face-threatening acts (FTAs, Brown and Levinson 1987, 65) in order to relate better to peers and teachers encourage digital saving strategies through use of emoji. The visual icons take on some of the communicative weight by intermediating variables such as power, distance, and imposition (Brown and Levinson 1987).

Positive politeness strategies seek reaching overall agreement by deciding on common interests or shared interactional goals, by paying extra

attention to one's interlocutor, showing reciprocity and contributing to a mutually beneficial quid pro quo. Negative politeness strategies are connected to being indirect, to showing pessimism or lack of willingness to accept imposition while attempting to give deference. Off record strategies may resort to understatement or overstatement, playing with vagueness and ambiguity, hinting at possible issues or misinterpretations. Emoji alongside CMC cues may enhance online communication serving a face-management function.

Emoji fulfill an essential function as modalisers within politeness strategies (Beiswenger and Pappert 2019). Politeness manifests itself in written exchanges (in-real-time or carefully constructed interactions) through the conscious use of emoji not only when light-hearted comments are made but, most importantly perhaps as redressive action for providing constructive feedback in peer to peer interactions or instructor to student exchanges. Students' sociointerpersonal stance is supported by the use of emoji within politeness strategies as they mediate FTAs (face threatening acts) turning them into FSA (face saving acts). Positive face (one's need to be appreciated) as well as negative face (one's need to keep the status quo by maintaining autonomy and freedom from imposition) are both credited and validated by emoji use creating a communicative toolkit that is both useful and playful.

Study participants were asked to provide several adjectives that they think *the others* (*the other* students, their group peers) would associate with the student's face/self-image in order to assess the degree of awareness related to *face* perception as well as the existence of potential differences between the way one perceives himself/herself and how he/she is perceived by others. The adjectives are visibly split into positive ones (connected to such as aspects as appropriate/professional academic image, likability degree, creative skills, ability to be part of a team, coherence, academic conduct, degree of preparedness) and negative ones (personal flaws; CEFR language level of competence limitations-students with A1-A2 levels of competence resort more frequently to attaching negative adjectives in order to describe their e-face; inflexibility; unwillingness to participate, lack of sensitivity to turn taking, etc.). Identity construction is consequently built on either divergent or convergent interpretations one gets from others. Some of the positive adjectives associated with students' perception of their face via others' interpretation are the following: *polite, opinionated, present, aware, active listener, empathetic, kind, team focused, collaborative, considerate, helpful, competitive, intelligent, witty, data driven, talkative*. Conversely, some of the negative adjectives associated with weaknesses as face-ridden consequences and perceived as labels from the others are: *impulsive, arrogant, silent, shy, withdrawn, anxious, unfocussed, uninteresting, incoherent, unprepared, fearful, rambling, blunt, tired, boring, unhelpful or detached*. The conclusions show the relevance of compare-contrast approaches to face-work while subsequently

leading to a variety of applications that may challenge or invite negotiation such as discussions and reflection based image enhancement plans of action. Due to limited class time spent on providing feedback, there is a need to assign post-task reflection time in order for students to have a comprehensive perspective over practical applications of facework in professional communication and use customised enhancement plans of action .

Face/self-image is anchored in two fundamental twin pillars: the way one sees oneself and the way one is perceived based on impact, relational work and willingness to adapt and/or to remain independent from imposition.

Hypothesis Two: *Emoji can be valid tools of contextualising online identity in written semi-formal academic communication interactions both between language instructors and learners and among peers.*

This part in the survey was designed to analyse students' attitude towards using emoji in written communication both in academic and semi-formal contexts.

When asked about the frequency of using emoji in the context of communicating with their teachers within emails, posts on platforms and during online classes using Teams, Zoom, Moodle 54.5% of respondents mentioned they embed these Netspeak features to a high extent. As part of their Netizen identity, using such linguistic markers accounts for a tendency to build rapport while maintaining the participatory culture and boosting significance even if the formality context of writing may differ from that with peers. This communicative exchange relying on dual coding of information pertains to a blend between language in formal or semi-formal language and recurrent use of emoji to enhance phatic communication and substitute for the lack of paraverbal cues in written communication.

Another aspect under scrutiny in the current study was students' tendency to use emoji more frequently in communication related to language classes as compared to communication exchanges related to courses in which Romanian was the instruction language. The interest regarding this aspect stems from the need to investigate the way in which code-switching with emoji is perceived as more natural and easier to use when the communicative exchange is in English rather than in students' mother tongue.

When asked about the tendency to use emoji more in written communication within the language class context as compared to other classes (taught in Romanian), 53.4% answered they tend to do so more in their English class, whereas 17% claimed the opposite and 29.5% were not aware of such a tendency. This is an indicator of code-switching as a cue of communicative and linguistic skills. There are examples of the online code-switching based on the speech-based communication, i.e. Internet users do not consider the languages

they use as different entities and “draw variously on whichever languages are in their repertoires... whichever languages have currency in a particular digital situation” (Tagg 2015, 43). Code-switching enables users to manage relationships, perform multicultural identities and build communities. Likewise, code-switching can lead to change of tone and ease of expression, thus justifying the preference of using such approach in English-based communicative exchanges.

To investigate the functional connotations that students give when using emoji, students were asked to choose from a list of suggested functions and in a follow-up question, to exemplify the role that such functions carry. The analysis of their responses, as well as excerpts from their open answers were visually represented in the mindmap below. Respondents indicated various linguistic and communicative functions to cater for particular branches of building rapport within online communication (see Figure 1 below).

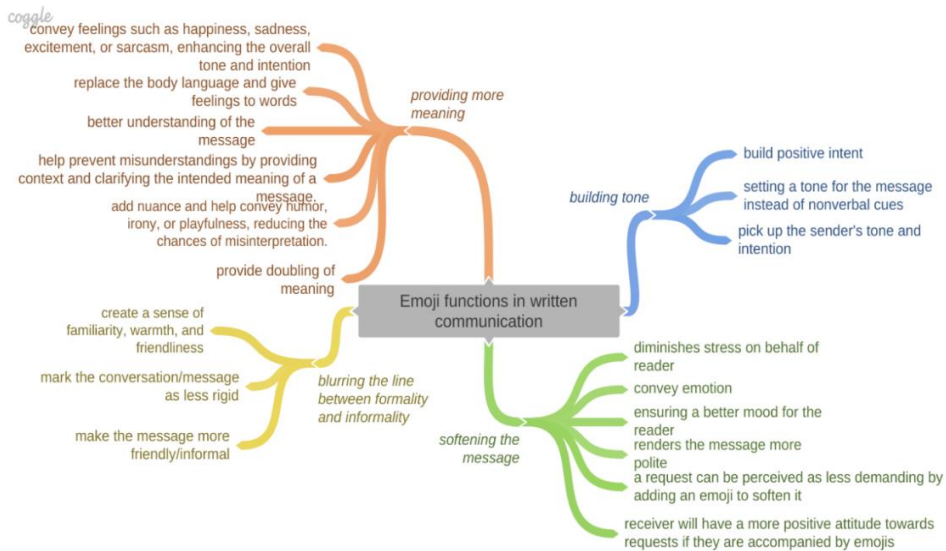


Figure 1. Representation of intended emoji functions in written communication

The answers can be categorised under the following sections: **providing more meaning** (in which situations emoji are perceived as facilitating a better understanding of the message, preventing misunderstanding, adding nuance, conveying feelings to words), **building tone** (with the aim to build positive intent, to set the tone for the message, or to pick up the sender’s tone), **softening the message** and **blurring the line between formality and informality**. Beyond the stereotype that emoji are merely playful elements suitable for social media and peer interactions, they are seen by students as boosting cues that can

enhance more complex written communication with their teachers. What is highly relevant in this context is that one voluntarily chooses an emoji and in a faceless environment the message is given a face.

In addition to investigating what functions students allocate emoji in their communicative exchanges, we sought to analyse the conveyed intentions within these exchanges. Students were asked the question *Which of the following intentions do you tend to convey when using emoji in communication (with teachers and colleagues)?* They were also encouraged to visualise their recently used emoji by looking in their smartphone apps, to see what tendency they had when communicating (see Figure 2 below).

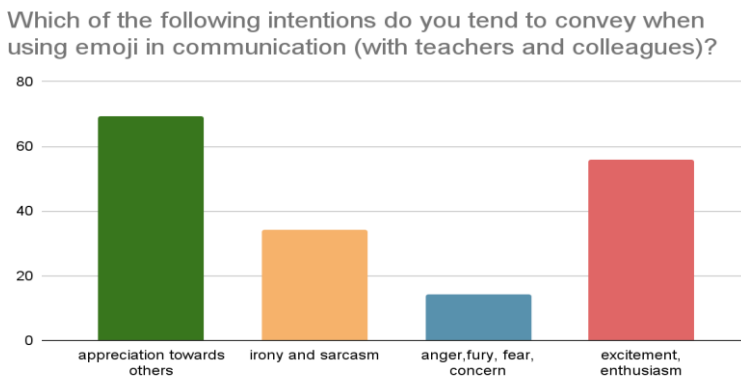


Figure 2. Conveying intentions with emoji in written communicative exchanges

There are particular correlations with rendering face-work in terms of substituting emotions for emoji use. 69.2% of respondents indicated that they use emoji to show appreciation towards others, which enhances peer assessment and collaboration in a participatory culture. Excitement and enthusiasm were likewise marked as recurring intentions (56%) to be correlated with their choice of emoji, indicative of positive face strategies. Moreover, the need for validation, which is an indicator specific for social media users and content creators is also present in this respect here, as well as reacting to messages with emoji.

The negative markers were also signalled by students, who mentioned that they use emoji to express irony, sarcasm (34.1% of respondents), as well as fear, concern or fury (14.3%), which are triggers for negative face-work. Nonetheless, regardless of the positive/negative intentional meaning carried by emoji, their use taps into the sense of belonging to an affinity space, which is built within the language classes.

Emoji can be valid tools of building identity and creating a participatory culture in written semi-formal academic communication

interactions both between language instructors and learners and between peers. The second hypothesis has been fully supported by our quantitative and qualitative research. In a (still) emerging field such as CMC, the use of emoji is one of the most noticeable features that can be embedded into utterances in a creative and context appropriate way. One's sense of identity is created and emotionally supported by emoji use. Study participants have validated the use of emoji as communicative devices that are at one's fingertips and are not limited to private and informal interactions.

Hypothesis three: *Students' identity is potentially created in CMC environments by impression management and relational work, fostering a participatory culture.*

When asked the question *Do you think that the image you want to show/project in class is the image the others (your peers, your teachers) have of you when you interact orally and in writing?*, 47.7% of the respondents perceive that there is an overlap between the two which suggests a degree of awareness related to one's communicative presence and impression management control within the academic language instruction context. Self-awareness and reflection associated with self-image/face as well as the existence of a perceived correspondence and alignment of one's projected values and the corresponding interpretation of these values by the communicative stakeholders.

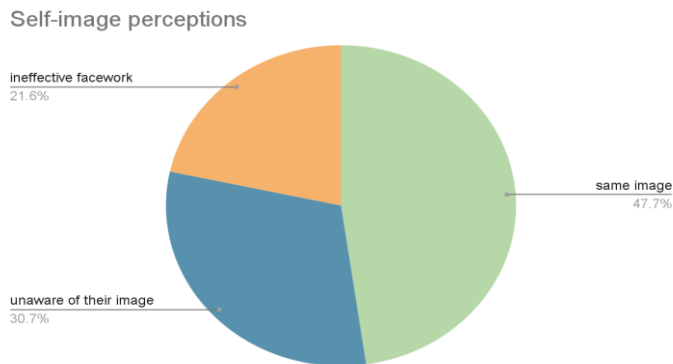


Figure 3. Self-image perceptions

Consequently, 21.6% respondents have answered the same question negatively indicating a more defective impression management as well as ineffective face-work applied to the respective communicative context. Additionally, 30.7% of respondents have stated that they are unable to decide whether such an overlap exists as they may be oblivious to the role of face-work strategies in

communication as well as the accountability one has in building, maintaining and marketing their self-image to good effect. The potential for academic instructors to tap into is both inviting and challenging, particularly because a significant share of respondents (30.7%) have claimed they are unaware as to what steps can be taken to project, maintain and enhance their self-image in communicative interactions.

In order to interpret the qualitative data we have obtained as response to the following face-work related question: *What are five to seven adjectives/nouns/verbs you would associate with the self-image/the face you want to project as a university student?*, we have chosen to provide a Coggle representation of some of the answers categorising information under 4 separate headings: *image projected for peers* (for creating rapports and engagement with colleagues), *image projected for teachers*, *image enhancement*, and *image built to match class culture*. Students were asked to provide open answers and the mind map below is a visual representation of how the raw data were categorised under the sections illustrated in Figure 4 below.

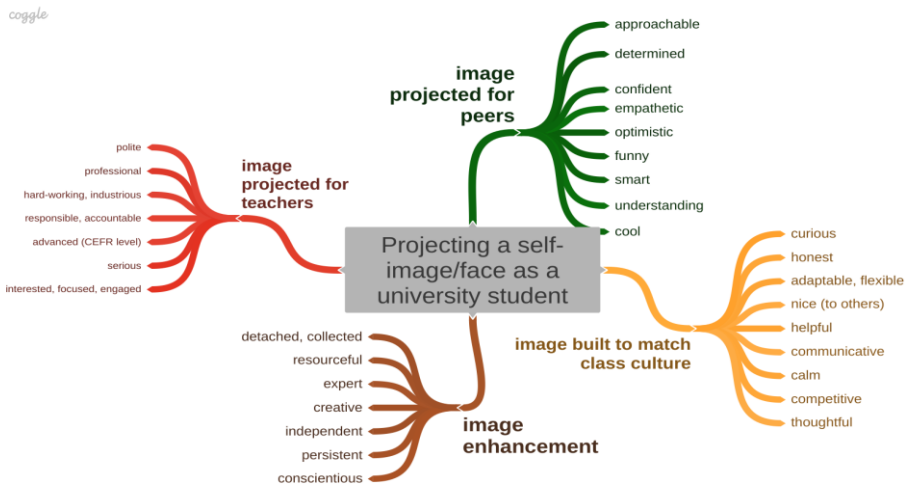


Figure 4. Projecting a self-image/face as a university student

While the words associated with the self- image/ face projected within the classroom environment tend to be mostly positive, there is a slight tendency to associate the wants and needs to construct a professional, academically valid face with the instructors rather than with peers. There is a more light-hearted approach in this respect proving a concern *to appear to be group appropriate*, to belong and adapt to the generational and group mindset. Class culture is another important issue as it lends itself to identifying a specific context which

is relevant to any research that focuses on interactional and relational analyses. By definition, foreign language instruction (whether FtF or CMC) is a medium where collaborative exchanges are requested and built on regularly, where the instructor's personal management style dictates the degree of willingness to participate as well as the students' engagement in developing language proficiency through adaptation to guidelines, participatory requests as well as the need to achieve a class culture-personal culture match.

When asked to appreciate *the level of difficulty relative to the projection of self-image in online/hybrid classes versus FtF classes*, 44.3% respondents have stated that this is fairly/very difficult in an online/hybrid medium as opposed to 55.7% who have identified the FtF medium as rendering more difficulty in effective self-image projection.

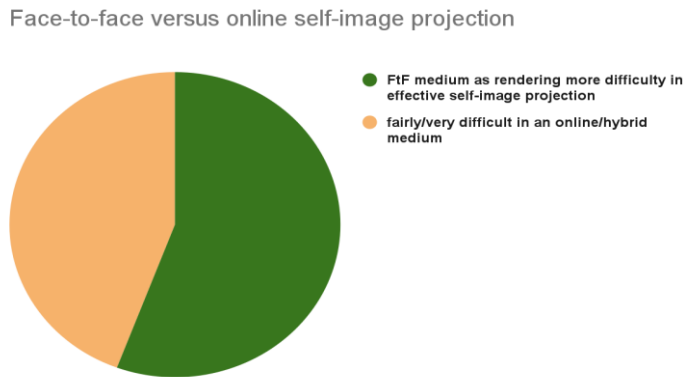


Figure 5. Face-to-face versus online self-image projection

There are several elements that contribute to the perceived level of difficulty in both respects: CEFR language competence levels and the associated self-confidence when called on to participate, awareness of existing face-work strategies that may enable learners to deal with (often anxiety-ridden) contexts, engagement level, perceived pressure on the part of both colleagues and course instructors.

Students' identity (both projected and perceived) is potentially created in CMC environments by face-work awareness and conceptualisations of face, impression management and relational work. Face as one's public self-image projected for the benefit of both the individual and the other discourse participants is a fundamental pragmatic concept that influences students' engagement level and academic development. Our research has validated the fact that face-work is perceived by students as being split into two facets: the way one sees himself/

herself and the way one is perceived by the others. Furthermore, face is a relational and identity constructing notion that transcends cultures and communication media. By using emoji as semiotic devices that are essential in digital communication students are empowered to clarify, modulate, and support meaning.

Conclusions

Digital media and computer-mediated technology are changing and reconfiguring themselves at an alarmingly fast rate and so are university main stakeholders' approaches to accessing information, co-creating and sharing knowledge and manifesting their identity via foreign language and applied communication instruction.

Online learning environments and multimedia apps and tools are creating interactional practices that go beyond the traditional classroom environment that, by definition, tends to be more controlled and prone to formal and semi-formal discourse. CMC is an object of continuous development, with complementary technologies, genres, and linguistic practices (BeiSwenger and Pappert 2019, 1). In an intricate and culturally dependent way, *face-work practices* are inherently connected to interactants' pragmatic competence display fostering identity construction in a faceless medium that often invites one's creative employment of contextualisation features. In this study, we have shown how learners perceive the self-use of *emoji-one of the most symbolic features of CMS* in their less formal/informal written utterances towards impression management, relational engagement and manifestations of (im) politeness. This, in turn, contributes to fostering a collaborative learning environment that does not exclude visual representations of one's self through *modalisers* within positive/negative politeness strategies. Positive and negative face-interactants' needs for belonging and adaptation and their strive for autonomy and preservation of autonomy in discourse are located within a SEL pedagogical framework. This pedagogical framework acknowledges offline practices that may influence face-work representations as a means of balancing out one's academic face and their personal face by means of a communication code where emoji not only replace physicality related features but also support communication exchanges as a shortcut to transmission of messages in, for example, online platform discussions, reflection based feedback forms or learning management systems chat rooms.

The most significant takeaway from the present study is the contention that *identity construction* in foreign language learning is mediated and supported by face-work practices in written exchanges where emoji are validated by peers as meaningful and useful. Furthermore, subsequent studies will include university

teaching staff (not only foreign language instructors) in order to gauge their perceptions of face-work/emoji applications in their class dynamics.

Focusing on the use of language in teacher-student/ student-student interactions, we have collected data from university undergraduates and graduates whose inputs are analysed through the filter of emoji use and emoji driven communicative strategies as well as pragmatic politeness theory and the concept of relational work. The results show students' perception of the self-image construct as it contributes to identity construction and enhancement in CMC. This study offers a qualitative and quantitative analysis of strategies employed by university students in order to manage communicative instances effectively. The preference for these strategies indicates that instructors and students are concerned about constructing politeness via emoji use by considering both their positive and negative face.

Consequently, there are practical implications for using metalinguistic commentary and emoji to maintain politeness in the online academic community articulating a foreign language mediated identity. CMC interactions have (online and offline) point towards the annotation of emoji role and functions to support interactive communication, sensitivity to turn taking, emotional engagement and communicative achievement of nonacademic written texts. This aspect is worth the acknowledgement and recognition on the part of learning communities that are culturally and linguistically inclusive.

Our analysis allows for future directions of study in written discourse expanding on how emoji and face work practices can contribute to more meaningful interactions:

1. Their association with face threatening acts and face saving acts as part of the politeness theoretical framework put forward by Brown and Levinson (1987) and, most importantly, the regulation of rapport management (Spencer Oatey 2015).
2. The particular semiotic potential (positive, negative, and neutral meaning) of emoji in digital communication enable learners and instructors to convey and interpret emotions, suggest courses of action, compensate for using silence, suggest discourse alterations as well as encourage collaborative development of outputs.
3. Within the field of foreign language instruction and efficiency ridden professional communication, the analysis of the rationale behind the use of emoji as well as the impact they have on text based communication, may reveal the individual, cultural and group context while pinpointing to the preferences displayed by technologically savvy generations as they contribute to adding metalinguistic layers to our digital language and culture.

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