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Mememes and emojis in Chinese compliments on Weibo

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Abstract: Noted for the ability to generate meanings across linguistic boundaries, nonverbal communication in computer-mediated communication has attracted increasing research attention. This study examines the prevalent but under-investigated phenomenon of mememes and emojis employed in Chinese compliments on the social platform Weibo. Data were collected in a follower-based community on Weibo, the Topic. The results revealed that mememes that did not feature the image of the complimented target outnumbered those mememes with the figure of the complimented target. Mememes without the image of the complimented target were employed to express compliments, either through explicit or implicit expressions, although explicit expressions of compliments were used more frequently. All of the mememes served to compliment the appearance, performance, and personality of the complimented targets. Regarding emojis, there were three patterns of emojis employed in online compliments, namely, emojis initiating compliments, emojis inserted in compliments, and emojis closing compliments. Overall, emojis functioned as transitions and intensifiers which increased the force of compliments.

Keywords: compliments; emojis; mememes; Weibo

1 Introduction

As a result of digitalization, computer-mediated communication (CMC) is playing an increasingly significant role in interaction between people. Particularly with the advent of social media, CMC is pervasive in millions of individuals' lives in the present era. Therefore, more studies on linguistic practice in digital communication are in demand to explore the similarities and differences in online interaction (Ren 2018: 1). Mememes and emojis, as enriched ways of facilitating online communication, have been gaining popularity. Many studies examine how mememes and emojis realize meaning-making to achieve pragmatic functions (Alshenqeeti 2016: 61; Jiang and Vásquez 2019: 1; Parkwell 2019: 2). However, comparatively few

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studies have investigated how they are employed in specific speech acts. As multimedia attachments can aid text-based communication on social media, for example, to add emotions to the communicative acts (Yus 2014: 524), it may yield more insights to examine memes and emojis in a certain speech act.

In addition, receiving widespread attention, compliments have been discussed to a great extent in oral and written settings concerning its contribution to building and sustaining rapport among interlocutors (Wolfson and Judd 1983: 86). However, less attention has been paid to how compliments are achieved with the help of memes and emojis. Therefore, this study aims to explore a pragmatic understanding of memes and emojis in online compliments on Chinese Weibo.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature on memes, emojis, and compliments. Section 3 first provides a brief introduction to Weibo and the Topic community, then it introduces the methodology and data targeting compliments made to three Chinese celebrity hosts on Weibo. The findings are then presented in two categories concerning memes and emojis in Section 4. Section 5 discusses the findings, and Section 6 concludes the study.

2 Literature review

Section 2 reviews existing literature on memes, emojis, and compliments, followed by the research questions that the present study attempts to investigate.

2.1 Memes

The term meme (derived from the Ancient Greek *imema*, ‘something imitated’) was coined by the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (1976: 192) to explain cultural evolution. It refers to “any cultural unit that is spread from person to person through replication or imitation” (Piata 2016: 39). According to Dawkins (1976: 192), memes can be tunes, ideas, expressions, or other cultural units that could realize self-replication and transmission from individual to individual. Focusing on CMC, Shifman (2013: 367) defines memes as “units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process.”

Memes have been discussed to investigate humor (Dynel 2016; Kassing 2020; Piata 2016). For instance, Dynel (2016) explored the Internet humor achieved through memes. The findings revealed that humor realized in a new visual-verbal way reflected social media evolvement. In addition, memes have been investigated in semiotic approaches on which cultures have an impact. For example, Jiang and

Vásquez (2019: 1) examined memes on Chinese social media and found that local meanings, to be specific, rebellion and transgression, were created by memes when mixed with visual references to Chinese features.

In this paper, we will examine a particular type of meme, the image macro, which is comprised of an image and a creative caption submitted by a user, typically to evoke resonance and responses from other users with whom the meme poster is communicating. The structure of an image macro, according to De la Rosa-Carrillo (2015: 18), “consists of a picture with text above and below the image in the macro.” Image macros are not only the most common genre of memes in CMC, but also one of the clearest examples of the interaction of imitation and transformation (Milner 2016: 73). Kassing (2020: 1) explored sport image macros and found memes served as an instrument by which users expanded the trash talk discourse to the digital sphere. Jiang and Vásquez (2019: 1) examined a specific type of image macro that featured the grinning facial expression of a US wrestler in Chinese online discourse. The results showed that image macros created local meanings when blended with visual references to Chinese digital culture and Chinese popular culture.

2.2 Emojis

Emojis are a set of pictographs, which are more popular than emoticons (sequence of punctuation marks representing facial expressions) (Sampietro 2019: 109). Created in Japan in the mid-1990s as a new communication form for page users, the literal meaning of the word ‘emoji’ is ‘picture character’ in Japanese (Novak et al. 2015: 2). Emojis are given credit for their capacity to create meaning across linguistic boundaries, and are associated with informal cyber interaction for building and maintaining social bonds (Parkwell 2019: 1).

There seems to be a growing need for an emoji-based representation for thoughts and emotions, and emojis fill this need by adding nonverbal cues to the intent and emotions of messages in online communication (Alshenqeti 2016: 56; Miller et al. 2016: 264). Alshenqeti (2016: 64) examined the use and place of emojis as a form of language and found that emojis functioned as visual forms into the digital sphere. Moreover, emojis could reduce the possibility of misinterpretation of online text by providing nonverbal indications to receivers of the message. Gibson et al. (2018: 91) investigated the communicative functions of the “hand covering face” emoji in a mobile reading community in China and found that the emoji functioned as a laughter token. In addition, Parkwell (2019: 1) investigated the “toilet” emoji employed by one celebrity, Cher, on Twitter. The findings suggested that affinity was built between Cher and her followers as a result of compliments in

which the emojis served as both attitude and ideation. Sampietro (2019: 110) explored the functions of emojis in Spanish WhatsApp chat, and argued that emojis could signal the illocutionary force of different speech acts. In addition, scholars such as Kerslake and Wegerif (2017: 76) and Stark and Crawford (2015: 5–6) stated that the way that emojis produced meaning was context-based, in which interpretation of emojis was relative to cultural background and interpersonal interaction.

2.3 Compliments

Holmes (1986: 485) defines compliments as a speech act that “explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some ‘good’ (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer.” Complimenting behavior demonstrated the politeness of speakers and socio-linguistic values (Chen and Yang 2010: 1960; Yu 2005: 115). In addition, compliments could help to enhance solidarity between the speaker and addressee (Holmes 1986: 486).

Research on compliments has been widely discussed regarding English variation, for instance, American English, New Zealand English, African English, and Philippine English (Herbert and Straight 1989; Holmes 1986; Wolfson and Judd 1983; Zhang 2013). Herbert and Straight (1989: 35) conducted a cross-cultural study concerning compliments and compliment responses among Americans and South Africans. The findings revealed that while Americans gave compliments more frequently than South African peers, they rejected compliments more often than South Africans at the same time. Holmes (1986: 503) examined everyday compliment exchanges in New Zealand and found that interpretations to compliments varied cross-culturally because culture differences rendered various appropriate compliments topics and sociopragmatic competence.

In addition to cultural differences, other variants have been taken into consideration in compliment research. For example, Wolfson (1984: 7) investigated compliments from the perspective of gender. It was found that compliments toward men were quite limited in terms of topics, lexical choices, and status of the speakers, while compliments toward women were full of choices of topic, lexical choices, and status of the speakers. Furthermore, Wolfson (1984: 7) documented that the addressee’s appearance or ability/performance constituted the majority of topics for compliments. From the perspective of social status, Herbert (1989: 25) argued that compliments generally flowed from persons of higher-status to people belonging to a lower social status. In addition, a compliment flowing from people of higher social status to someone of lower social status was more likely to be accepted than the other way around (Gajaseni 1994: 44).

Shifting to Chinese discourse, comparatively little research concerning compliments has been conducted. Lin et al. (2012: 1486) investigated the effect of region on compliments given by the residents of Taiwan and the residents of Chinese mainland. The findings revealed that the majority of Chinese preferred to pay explicit compliments and that compliments for performance and ability were popular. However, a contradiction regarding compliment topic was observed in Wang and Tsai (2003: 146), who found that appearance was the most common topic in interactions among Taiwanese college students. The research findings of Lin et al. (2012: 1497) and Wang and Tsai (2003: 118) concerning compliment topics echoed the study of Wolfson (1984: 7), which stated that appearance and performance were major topics for compliments. Moreover, Yu (2005: 106) studied the cross-cultural features and functions of paying compliments. Results showed that in Chinese culture, compliments were mainly employed as assertions of admiration, whereas Wang and Tsai (2003: 148) suggested that Taiwan Chinese students employed compliments to establish solidarity. In addition, by exploring the communication style of students of Chinese mainland and students of Taiwan in terms of their realizations of compliments, Ren et al. (2013: 303) found that Chinese speakers tended to be explicit when giving compliments to others, especially between people of equal status, in order to maintain a sense of group harmony.

Recent research has also investigated compliments in online communication. For example, Eslami et al. (2015: 244) explored online compliments in Persian on Facebook. The results revealed that women, as a marginalized group, benefited from the digital space in asserting linguistic identity. In addition, social network users employed compliments to evaluate others, which strengthened social rapport in English and Spanish (Maíz-Arévalo 2012: 994). Similarly, Iyanga-Mambo (2019: 110) examined the strategic use of formulas in compliments on YouTube. Findings suggested that complimenting strengthened the value of the video-blogger and the community.

As indicated by the above literature review, previous research has mainly focused on the communicative functions of memes and emojis. In addition, compliments studied in Chinese discourse were mainly conducted offline. Nevertheless, the way memes and emojis achieve meaning-making and thus contribute to complimenting is under-researched. Therefore, trying to contribute to the existing research, this study investigates compliments realized via memes and emojis on Chinese Weibo to address the following two research questions:

- 1) What strategies are employed in memes and emojis in online compliments on Weibo?
- 2) What functions do memes and emojis serve in online compliments?

3 The study

Section 3 introduces the research setting from which the data derived, data collecting procedure, and data analysis framework.

3.1 Context of the study

Weibo, literally meaning “micro-blog,” is a leading social media platform in China for people to generate, share, and discover content online. As a counterpart to Twitter in China, Weibo provides users with an online platform not only for self-expression in real time, but also for social interaction. A user can create and attach multimedia and long-form content to his or her posts; s/he also can add multimedia content while either commenting or reposting other users’ posts. In addition, users may mention or talk to other people using “@UserName” formatting, add hashtags, and follow other users (Weibo 2020).

The Topic (超话-*chaohua*) on Weibo is a collection of communities for followers of celebrities or activities to share posts and opinions. Unlike the public domain on Weibo, where users are free to post content at will, in the Topic, only those who subscribe to the Topic they have an interest in are entitled to post. This user-filter function makes it possible for the Topic community to be an optimized platform for fans to express compliments for what they appreciate in common and receive reciprocal responses. In addition, users can post emojis, memes, photos, gifs (a lossless format for image files that supports both animated and static images), hashtags, etc. as part of their posts, providing conducive environment to explore compliments delivered via emojis and memes, as users attempt to express compliments and attract like-minded within communities.

3.2 Data collection

The memes and emojis examined in the present study were collected from the comments in the Topic concerning three prestigious professional male hosts in China, namely *Hui Kang*, *Beining Sa*, and *Guangquan Zhu*. We selected the posts because, on the one hand, compliments toward the three hosts were abundant and thus easy to access, and, on the other hand, the three hosts were all males, which could exempt possible gender influences in the employment of memes and emojis in online compliments.

The dataset consisted of naturally occurring comments expressing compliments. First, we scanned the comments in the Topic on the three hosts, respectively,

and tracked to the very first post created on November 25, 2019. Every post in the Topic community is arranged chronologically and stored on different pages with each page accommodating approximately 40 posts. One could scroll down to browse every post in the Topic community before turning to another page. Twenty-three pages of posts at most were available. In this study, the largest repertoire of accessible data extended from November 25 to December 10, 2019, ranging half a month. Altogether 25 compliment memes and 89 emoji-including comments were collected.

It is worth mentioning that memes and emojis can perform multiple functions. It may be possible that memes and emojis used alone, that is, not in combination with words, may perform the function of compliments. However, we did not collect memes and emojis used alone in the present study, with the exception of the memes captioned with words to fulfill the compliment-conveying function. The reason for excluding the single memes and emojis was that many of them might be posted out of politeness or other functions rather than voicing compliments. It is difficult, if not impossible, from the researchers' perspective to be certain of ensuring they are compliments.

Although all of the posts in the Topic community are open to the public, we anonymized the data for ethical reasons, since we could not check for research consensus from the users whose complimentary comments were selected in the present study. To do so, we kept the first and last characters of the users' names and replaced the rest with "*" in the examples. Users' identities vary greatly, and thus we believe that the replacement will blur their identities and fulfill privacy protection.

3.3 Data analysis

We categorized the memes into two groups: memes with the host's image and memes without the host's image, according to whether they included the image of the complimented target or not. For those that do not include the image of the complimented targets, we further grouped them into explicit expression and implicit expression. Drawing on Maíz-Arévalo (2012: 983), in the present study, we consider compliments as explicit when they are realized by affirmative or exclamative sentences, and implicit when they require inferences from the corresponding implicature for interpretation. According to the way the images and words are arranged in memes, implicit expression could be further categorized into metaphor and comparison. Metaphor, referring to one kind of figure of speech that makes a comparison by relating one thing to another, could not only occur in language but also in pictures (Forceville 1994: 1). Comparison is the process of considering something similar or of equal quality to something else.

Emojis were analyzed based on their positions in compliments, to be specific, whether they were used in the beginning, the middle, or the end of the compliment.

4 Results

This section presents findings concerning meme and emoji strategies. While memes were featured either with or without the image of the complimented targets to express approval, emojis were placed at different positions in sentences to pay compliments.

4.1 Meme strategies

Table 1 presents the frequency and percentage of strategy patterns of memes. Complimentary memes concerning the hosts can be categorized into two groups: memes with the images of hosts captioned with texts and memes without the images of hosts. As can be seen in Table 1, memes featured without the complimented targets outnumber those with an image of the host (18 vs. 8).

In memes without the figures of the complimented targets, explicit expressions are employed relatively more frequently than implicit expressions (11 vs. 7). In implicit expression of compliments, comparison appears in a slightly higher proportion of employment than metaphor (4 vs. 3). It should be clarified that each of the 25 collected memes enjoys one strategy only, with the exception of Figure 7, which employs a combination of two strategies, that is, explicit expression and metaphor. Therefore, Figure 7 was counted twice under the categories of explicit expression and implicit expression (we will elaborate later). As a result, the total number of strategies is 26 instead of 25, and the total percentage exceeds 100%.

Table 1: Frequency and percentage of different strategies in memes.

Strategies	Frequency	Percentage		
Memes with host's image	8	32.0%		
Memes without host's image	Explicit expression	11	44.0%	
	Implicit expression	Metaphor	3	12.0%
		Comparison	4	16.0%
Total	26	104%		

4.1.1 Memes with host's image

In this study, all of the memes with the host's image, regardless of the captioned words, compliment the adorable personality of the hosts. For example, Figures 1 and 2 both depict a clumsy yet cute identity of the hosts. In Figure 1, the meme is captioned with characters such as “迷茫” (*mimang*) ‘confused,’ “尴尬而又不失礼貌的微笑” (*gang'a er you bushi limao de weixiao*) ‘feeling embarrassed but smiling out of politeness anyway,’ presenting an unusual state of this always professional host, and thus provides a down-to-earth as well as loveable image of him. Likewise, in Figure 2, the image of



Figure 1: Meme with Hui Kang's image.



嗯？我看见有人给我P黑图！

Figure 2: Meme with Guangquan Zhu's image.

Zhu's head is tailored and combined with simple line-drawing, with the words reading: “我看见有人给我P黑图” (*wo kanjian you ren gei wo P heitu*) ‘I notice my picture is mischievously photoshopped.’ The irony here is that Zhu steps out as if to stop his pictures from being photoshopped. However, as we can observe from the readily made meme, his attempt is in vain, rendering the meme funny and Zhu adorable.

On the surface level, it seems that memes with the host's image do not express compliments directly, and on some occasions even captioned with seemingly compliment-irrelevant words such as “迷茫” ‘confused’ in Figure 1 and “我看见有人给我P黑图” ‘I notice my picture is mischievously photoshopped’ in Figure 2. However, they successfully pay compliments to the hosts for their endearing personalities by making a stark contrast between their professional and clumsy images.

4.1.2 Memes without host's image

Memes captioned without host's image were either explicitly or implicitly applied to pay compliments. In explicit expressions, positive phrases and sentences contributed to compliment delivery; in implicit expressions, metaphors and comparisons conduced to compliment expression.

4.1.2.1 Explicit expression

Explicit compliments could be realized through employing positive adjectives, verbs, or adverbs (Boyle 2000: 28). In this study, compliments are considered explicit when approving affirmative or exclamative phrases or sentences are employed.

In this strategy, captions along with in-meme figures work together to demonstrate strong approval for the complimented target for their appearance and personality. For example, through the depiction of how characters in the memes are thrilled by Sa, Figures 3 and 4 pay Sa compliments in a clear-cut way. Figure 3 depicts the excitement of a girl when she watches Sa. In Figure 3, the leading-in caption reads: “当我看期待已久的新鲜撒撒出现的第一秒时” (*dang wo kan qidai yijiu de xinxian Sasa chuxian de di yi miao shi*) ‘the first moment I notice Sasa, whom I have been waiting to see for so long.’ Above the image of a girl with a hysterical look is the caption: “撒贝宁太好看了!!” (*Sa Beining tai haokan le*) ‘Beining Sa is so good-looking!!’ In this meme Beining Sa is addressed as “Sasa,” a nickname employed to show appreciation and intimacy with Sa. This appearance-praising compliment meme is not only explicit in an illocutionary way, but also direct in visual manner. This meme describes that the little girl cannot help screaming out that Sa is handsome, which compliments him loud and clear. In Figure 4, a pigeon moves its neck back and forth with its mouth wide open, as if it is screaming out the sentence, “撒贝宁为什么这么优秀!!!!” (*Sa Beining weishenme zheme youxiu*) ‘How come Beining Sa is such a perfect being!!!!’ This exclamative sentence is written by the creator of the meme. However, in this meme, it is expressed through the neck-

当我看期待已久的新鲜 撒撒出现第一秒时：



Figure 3: Meme complimenting Sa's appearance.

dancing pigeon, as if the pigeon is attracted to Sa and cannot help complimenting him, which justifies Sa's charisma. It is worth noting that the repetition of exclamation marks indicates the degree of the compliments. Both Figures 3 and 4 employ repetition of exclamation marks because exclamation marks strengthen the degree and attitude of the message (Ren 2019: 200). Thus, the common message in the memes, which are compliments to Sa, is focused and highlighted.



Figure 4: Meme complimenting Sa's performance.

Semiotic work is contextual, and meaning is a pragmatic concern with the aim of getting some interactional work done (Stark and Crawford 2015: 6). In Figure 5, two adult men are arguing about who is the bigger fan of Beining Sa. The older one with a gray beard states, “我爱撒撒” (*wo ai Sasa*) ‘I adore Sasa.’ The other man in a cap counters the older man, claiming victory in the competition, saying, “我更爱撒撒!” (*wo geng ai Sasa*) ‘I adore Sasa more!’ Then this statement is countered in return by the older man, exclaiming, “撒撒是天上的星星 我最爱他!!!” (*Sasa shi tianshang de xingxing wo zui ai ta*) ‘Sasa is a star in the sky and I adore him more than anyone else does!!!’ After that, the man in the cap compliments Sa by stating, “撒撒是光是太阳是我的最爱啊啊啊啊!!!!” (*Sasa shi guang shi taiyang shi wo de zui ai a a a*) ‘Sa is light, Sa is the sun, and Sa is my favorite person!!!!’ Finally, the older man shouts, “你给我听好了 我!!最!!爱!!!” (*ni gei wo ting hao le wo zui ai*) ‘You listen to me. !!! love him!! the most!!!’ In this meme, the red faces of the two adults show that the competition is fierce and they are serious about the competition, indicating that they mean what they say in their compliments toward Sa.

Different from the above three memes that directly pay compliments using excited scenes as memes, the following two memes achieve a complimentary function through the through the crying and frowning looks of in-meme characters. For example, in Figure 6, when a dog is asked, “你怎么了” (*ni zenme le*) ‘what happened to you,’ with joyful tears in its eyes, it answers, “撒撒太好了” (*Sasa tai hao le*) ‘Sasa is so wonderful’ (that it makes me want to cry). The meme pays a compliment to Sa by depicting a crying dog touched by how awesome Sa is. In Figure 7, an animated character from *The Simpsons* lying in bed suffers from insomnia from 11 p.m. to 3 a.m. because it cannot stop thinking about the perfection of Sa. It offers compliments to Sa by describing him as “才华渊博小王子撒撒” (*caihua yuanbo xiao wangzi Sasa*) ‘Sasa, the knowledgeable little prince.’ Moreover, it states, “我永远爱撒撒” (*wo yongyuan ai Sasa*) ‘I will support Sa forever.’

As the above two memes indicate, although crying and frowning looks might imply negative emotions, for example disappointment and confusion, they make sense when combined with positive explicit sentences captioned in memes. To sum up, all of the above memes use approving sentences or phrases to realize explicit compliments.

4.1.2.2 Implicit expression

Implicit compliments implicate indirectly (Herbert 1991: 383). In the present study, implicit compliments could be further categorized into compliments achieved through metaphor and comparison. We will illustrate the two sub-strategies respectively.

As a kind of figure of speech that makes a comparison by relating one thing to another unrelated thing, metaphor is a powerful persuasive tool. In the present



Figure 5: Meme depicting two men arguing over who appreciates Being Sa more.

study, metaphor helps to convey the compliments in Figures 7 and 8. In Figure 7, apart from explicit praise for Sa, metaphor could be observed as well. In it, Sa is



Figure 6: Meme complimenting Sa's personality.

described as “芳心纵火犯 撒微笑” (*fangxin zonghuofan Sa Weixiao*) ‘smiley Sa, arsonists to girls’ hearts’ in the literal meaning, which is a trending description for men who are handsome, likable, and easy to have a crush on. In this meme, Sa is praised as a person who metaphorically steals girls’ heart, giving credit to his charming personality. In Figure 8, an adhesive bandage is applied to protect a wound on someone’s arm. Metaphorically, the wound is described as “生活中所有的破事” (*shenghuo zhong suoyou de poshi*) ‘all my life problems,’ while the adhesive bandage is described as “撒贝宁” (*Sa beining*) ‘Beining Sa.’ For those who appreciate Sa, he is metaphorically taken as the adhesive bandage to fix and heal all problems in real life. In both memes, metaphors are employed to facilitate the compliments’ delivery and to increase the amusement of the memes, which could attract fans who share the same feelings for Sa in the Topic.

In the present study, comparison, which is the process of considering something to be similar to or of equal quality to something else, is also used to express compliments in memes in the Topic. For example, Figure 9 employs a heartbeat-related image to pay compliments to the host’s personality and performance, in which heartbeats affected by Sa are compared to heartbeats in influence-free circumstances. In Figure 9, three electrocardiograms respectively demonstrate the scenario of a “normal heartbeat,” “deceased heartbeat,” and “撒贝宁出场” (*Sa Beining chuchang*) ‘Sa-performing-onstage heartbeat.’ Compared with the normal and the deceased heartbeat, when Sa performs, the heart beats so wildly



Figure 7: Meme complimenting Sa's professionalism.



Figure 8: Meme with adhesive bandage metaphor.



Figure 9: Meme with heartbeat comparison.

that the electrical signals go up and down dramatically. By comparison, it suggests that Sa is an awesome host so that when he steps on the stage it will cause abnormal heartbeat rhythms in his audiences. In Figure 10, two books of different lengths, which are labeled as “撒撒的知识储备量” (*sasa de zhishi chubeiliang*) ‘the knowledge repertoire of Sasa’ and “我的知识储备量” (*wo de zhishi chubeiliang*) ‘the knowledge repertoire of me’ are compared. The book on the left is much thicker than the one on the right, showing that Sa is much more well-informed. In



Figure 10: Meme with knowledge repertoire comparison.

all of the above memes, Sa is complimented through comparison for his charming personality, professional performance, and knowledge competence.

In summary, the above memes employ metaphors and comparisons to pay compliments, which implicitly offers approving comments.

4.2 Emoji strategies

Emojis can serve semantic, pragmatic, and grammatical roles in accordance with their position in a clause and the context of the message, which are often considered as an image-based addition (Parkwell 2019: 2). There are three types of emoji strategies employed for complimenting, including compliments starting with emojis, compliments with inserted emojis, and compliments ending with emojis. Table 2 presents the frequency and percentage of emoji strategies according to where emojis are placed in complimentary comments. As can be seen in Table 2, emojis employed at the end of compliments ($f = 65$) were the pattern used

Table 2: Frequency and percentage of different strategies in emojis.

	Frequency	Percentage
Compliments starting with emojis	7	7.9%
Compliments with inserted emojis	17	19.1%
Compliments ending with emojis	65	73.0%
Total	89	100%

most frequently by Chinese Weibo users to pay compliments. Emojis inserted within compliment comments ($f=17$) were used more frequently than emojis at the very beginning of compliments ($f=7$).

4.2.1 Compliments starting with emojis

In the scenario where emojis are used prior to the words, emojis serve two functions: a) as indications of attitudes and b) as signals initiating compliments. In Figure 11, the words read: “啊啊啊啊我可我可!” (*a a a wo ke wo ke*) ‘ahh ahh ahh Sa is my type! Sa is my type!’ The “out-of-control” emoji indicates that the person paying the compliments cannot help being excited about Sa’s appearance and ability, giving credit to the charisma of Sa and acknowledging him as the type of person the comment poster is into. In Figure 12, three “kissing with glittering eyes wide opened” emojis are followed by the compliment, which reads, “康老师太帅了” (*kang laoshi tai shuai le*) ‘Mr. Kang is so handsome.’ Here, emojis on the one hand express appreciation for Kang for being good-looking, while on the other hand, they initiate the complimentary comments.

In addition, emojis and words that form comments are coherent in compliment meaning-making. Both emojis and words are combined together to work for one theme, which is a compliment in this study. In Figure 13, the “drooling with eyes shaped in red heart” emojis go before the compliment, which reads, “集颜值与才华于一身的男神!” (*ji yanzhi yu caihua yu yishen de nanshen*) ‘Kang is a perfect being



Figure 11: Comment on Beining Sa’s appearance and ability.

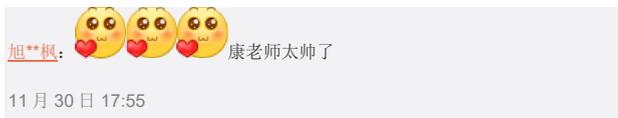


Figure 12: Comment on Hui Kang’s appearance.



Figure 13: Comment on Hui Kang’s appearance and professionalism.

who is good-looking and talented!’ The emojis themselves are expressions of appreciation for Kang’s attractiveness. Together with the words that praise Kang’s appearance and competence, the emojis strengthen the degree of the compliments to Kang in a visual form. In Figure 14, the “eyes buried by hands” emoji indicates shyness, which is in accordance with the comment which reads, “太苏了!” (*tai su le*) ‘Kang is so peng!’ “苏” (*su*) is a popular online description for people or objects that are attractive and alluring. In this comment, Kang is complimented for being appealing, so the person who composed this comment cannot help being shy when talking about Kang because one of the dominant feelings of men and women reacting to someone whom they are attracted to is shyness.

All of the above emojis were used prior to the complimentary compliments and work as attitude indicators as well as signals for the start of the compliments. Emojis contribute to conveying feelings in digital arena by “filling the void for facial expressions that enhance verbal communication” (Alshenqeti 2016: 60). The function of the emojis here is not just to make compliments, but also to back up the compliment posts to which these comments are attached. Further, the repetition of the emojis followed by descriptive words reiterates the compliment topic.

4.2.2 Compliments with inserted emojis

When inserted in complimentary comments, emojis serve as transitions between different sentences. In Figure 15, “red heart” emojis conclude the comment, “从黑暗中现身时撒撒脸上的笑容灿烂得像在发光” (*cong heian zhong xianshen shi Sasa lianshang de xiaorong canlan de xiang zai faguang*) ‘Sa is dazzling with smile when he turns up from the darkness.’ In this comment, ‘red heart’ emojis

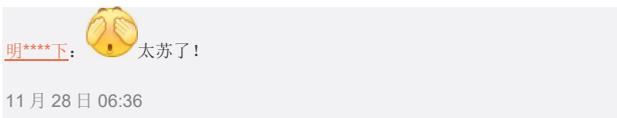


Figure 14: Comment on Hui Kang’s attractiveness.



Figure 15: Comment on Beining Sa’s appearance.

are coherent with the latter part of the words appreciating Sa's appearance: “真是, 爱了” (*zhenshi ai le*) ‘I literally love him.’ Figure 16 starts with a compliment on Sa's appearance, stating, “太好看了” (*tai haokan le*) ‘Sa is so good-looking,’ followed by the repetition of four “crying face” emojis which are in tandem with the latter part of the compliment, reading, “怎么会有这么完美的人” (*zenme hui you zheme wanmei de ren*) ‘how come there exists such a perfect human like Sa.’ The “crying face” emojis that express the joy-out-of-tears emotion are optimum for this occasion. The emojis above are all inserted between the comments to conclude the former part and initiate the latter part of the compliments. At the same time, the emojis themselves help to express the users' appreciation for the hosts.

4.2.3 Compliments ending with emojis

In this study, emojis at the end of the complimentary comments are employed as conclusion markers for compliments and at the same time expressions of emotion. In Figure 17, the user comments, “我从来不能客观评价你, 因为我的确, 超级 ... 超级喜欢你” (*wo conglai buneng keguan pingjia ni yinwei wo dique chaoji chaoji xihuan ni*) ‘I can never evaluate you (Kang) fair and square, because I like you so much that it is not possible for me to make an objective evaluation.’ A “red heart” emoji closes up this compliment, which is on the one hand an end-up signal, and on the other hand a visualized way to demonstrate the appreciation which universally relates to the red heart figure. In Figure 18, Sa is praised for “越来越有魅力” (*yue lai yue you meili*) ‘getting much more charming as time goes by.’ The concluding grin emoji is consistent with the upbeat emotion of the compliment.

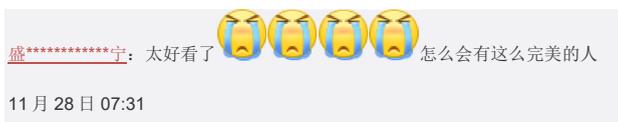


Figure 16: Comment on Beining Sa's appearance.



Figure 17: Comment on Hui Kang's attractiveness.

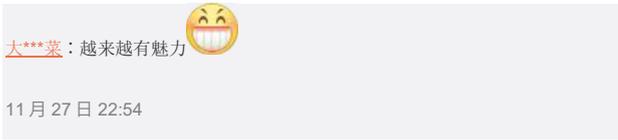


Figure 18: Comment on Beining Sa’s charm.

Cultural influences play a part in terms of the compliment topic. Figure 19 is a compliment on the shape of Zhu’s hands, reading, “叔哥手好看” (*quan ge shou haokan*) ‘Brother Quan has a nice pair of hands.’ Decoding emojis needs cultural competence, which is not universal but relative to cultural background (Kerslake and Wegerif 2017: 76). In China, men possessing well-shaped hands are considered as attractive and appealing to some girls. The user who gives the comment might want to express that s/he cannot believe that Zhu’s hands look so good that s/he wants to shed tears out of surprise and appreciation. In this comment, by saying Zhu has attractive hands, the user is actually paying a compliment to Zhu on his appearance.

As Ren (2019: 200) notes, Chinese consumers tended to employ repetitions to strengthen their comments online. In the present study, there exists a tendency in which the more intense the compliments are, the greater the number of emojis employed. In Figures 17 and 18, the compliments are offered in declarative sentences in a calm manner, and thus one emoji is employed to conclude each comment respectively. Figure 21 depicts the compliment: “越长越可爱!” (*yue zhang yue keai*) ‘Sa is becoming more and more adorable!’ Both Figures 19 and 21

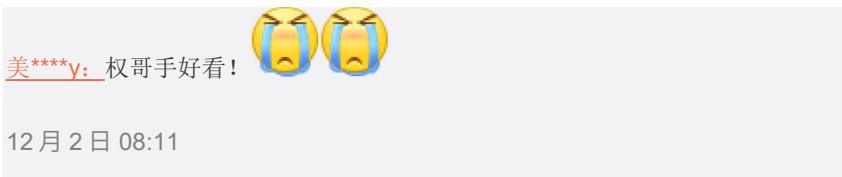


Figure 19: Comment on the shape of Guangquan Zhu’s hands.

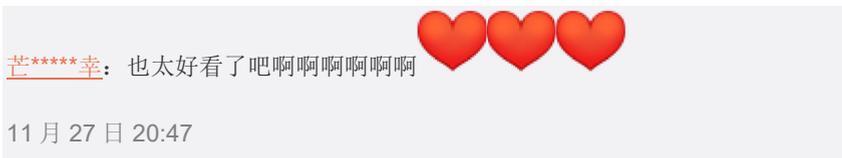


Figure 20: Comment on Guangquan Zhu’s appearance.

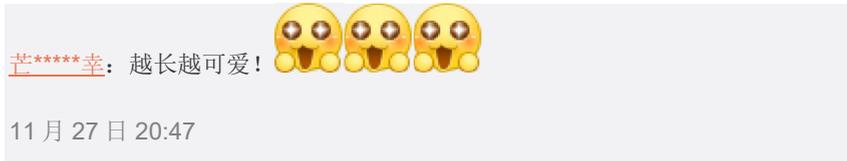


Figure 21: Comment on Beining Sa's appearance.

are expressed in exclamative sentences which strengthen the force of creators' admiration. Therefore, repetition of emojis occurs at the end of the comments as intensification. Although Figure 20 is a declarative sentence in itself, commenting “也太好看了吧啊啊啊啊啊啊” (*ye tai haokan le ba a a a a a a*) ‘Zhu is so good-looking ahh ahh ahh ahh ahh ahh,’ it uses an exclamation marker “啊” (*a*) ‘ahh’ to strengthen the degree of the compliments. Also, three “red heart” emojis are put in a row to intensify the pragmatic function of the compliment.

5 Discussion

Memes are popular in online communication. They can be successfully used for speech acts as long as the context of the nonverbal message is comprehended by the addressees (Grundlingh 2018: 3). An individual posting a meme as a compliment must assume that the audience shares the same codes and will interpret the poster's intent correctly. The data of this study were collected in a fan-based community which ensures the common ground for appreciation shown to the celebrities discussed. The present study revealed that explicit compliments were more popular in the CMC domain. This finding was in agreement with previous studies on Chinese compliments (Lin et al. 2012: 1494; Ren et al. 2013: 303), which claimed that explicit compliments were preferred by Chinese. Moreover, this study showed that performance and appearance were major topics for memes in Weibo compliments, echoing previous studies that compliments on ability and appearance enjoy great popularity (Wang and Tsai 2003: 118; Wolfson 1984: 7). In addition, the findings of the present study also suggested that other than performance and appearance, personalities, for instance charm, were also a popular topic for compliments in the Topic community. In terms of the functions that memes served, expressing admiration and appreciation for the complimented target was dominant, which was in line with Yu (2005: 106)'s finding that Chinese compliments were mainly employed as assertions of admiration.

Graphic signs, emojis included, not only indicated emotions, but also contributed to pragmatic meaning-making (Dresner and Herring 2010: 60; Sandel

et al. 2019: 239). Emojis complemented the textual message and facilitate the receivers' understanding of the illocutionary force of the accompanying text. The primary purpose of adding emojis to new communication modes, for instance online communication, was to compensate the missing elements in traditional face-to-face communication such as conversation involvement and message delivery (Wagner et al. 2020: 306). Emojis in the present paper contributed to comprehension of the contexts accompanying the compliments. In addition, through the emojis, compliment comments became more vivid in expression and thus the illocutionary force of the compliments was reinforced. This finding is in tandem with Yus (2014: 518)'s conclusion that emojis could strengthen or emphasize a tone or meaning.

Although applying emojis contributed to compliment delivery, interpretation of emojis should be cautious due to details in nuances. Emojis rendered differently on different platforms, and the same emoji sent by one person on one device, may be quite different than what was employed on other platforms (Miller et al. 2016: 264). In addition, Al Rashdi (2018: 119) argued that while emojis can serve as communicative signals of emotion, they do not necessarily demonstrate the real facial expressions. The findings of the present study showed consistency with this theory, suggesting that the comprehension of emojis may rely on contexts. For instance, in Figure 11, although the emojis at the beginning of the comment demonstrated irritation, when put into the compliment context, in which the poster wrote: “啊啊啊啊我可我可! (*A a a wo ke wo ke*)” ‘ahh ahh ahh (Sa is) my type! (Sa is) my type!’ the emojis in fact expressed the poster's excitement instead of impatience.

In addition, the findings of this study showed that emojis could serve the function of marking sentence boundary, aligning with Amaghlobeli (2012: 352)'s findings which revealed that emoticons could perform the role of punctuation marks. This role may vary, mainly based on the position of emojis in texts: they could be replaced either in the beginning, the middle, or the end of comments. For example, while in Figures 15 and 16, emojis were applied between sentences as punctuation marks, in Figures 19 and 21, complimentary comments were delivered in exclamative sentences ending with exclamation marks. Then emojis, used as intensification devices, followed the exclamation marks and concluded the compliments. In above contexts, the use of emojis demonstrated the pursuit of coherence in compliment organization.

The findings of the present study showed agreement with those of Herbert (1987: 82) who stated in his status analysis that compliments frequently occurred between strangers. Those who paid compliments in this study demonstrated no connection with the complimented targets in real life. Nevertheless, the Topic community offers a platform for fans who are attracted by appreciation for celebrities with whom they barely have an acquaintance but whom they admire.

The group of fans are expanding in number and the compliments they offer to their favorite celebrities are pervasive in the Topic and other similar online fan-based communities.

However, the results of this study also showed some contradiction to previous findings. While Gajaseeni (1994: 44) believed compliments were more likely to be accepted when flowing from people of higher social status to people of lower social status, the present study found that most of the compliments paid in the cyber world flowed from followers or fans who were average people in comparatively lower social status to those they admired. Although there was no sign of compliment receivers responding to those compliments, those compliments were probably not rejected because of the content of compliments. This study attributed these differences to the media differences between face-to-face communication and online interaction. In addition, although previous studies found that compliments created social bonds and rapport between those who paid compliments and compliment receivers (Maíz-Arévalo 2012: 994; Sampietro 2019: 117; Wang and Tsai 2003: 148), compliments in the Topic contribute more to building connections among followers or fans than to establishing rapport between compliment givers and receivers. On the one hand, the busy agenda of celebrities and the substantial number of compliments increased the difficulty of the development of interaction between the complimented targets and those who pay compliments. On the other hand, the existence of the Topic enables like-minded people who share common interests to identify, approach, and pursue solidarity with each other.

6 Conclusions

Al Rashdi (2018: 125) stated that emotions could be employed to pay compliments. The present study agrees with this statement and goes further. The present study, turning to a pragmatic approach, was designed to focus on memes and emojis and investigate how they work in Chinese compliments on the social platform Weibo. This study observed that when used as compliments, memes without the image of those being complimented were widely used. The results showed that memes without the image of the complimented targets tended to demonstrate compliments either explicitly or implicitly, in which explicit compliments were preferred. In addition, implicit compliments in the Topic could be realized through two strategies, that is, metaphor and comparison. Through employing different strategies, the Chinese bloggers used memes to compliment the hosts' appearance, performance, and personality. In terms of emojis, there were three patterns of emojis in compliment comments: emojis starting compliments, emojis inserted within compliments, and emojis closing compliments. The emojis commonly

functioned as textual transitions and intensification devices which strengthened the illocutionary force of compliments.

While the analysis has highlighted the importance of the way memes and emojis are employed in Chinese online compliments, some caveats and suggestions apply to this research. First, in the process of data collection and analysis, the present study only employed the researchers' etic perspective to examine uses and functions of memes and emojis in the compliments. Future studies may want to employ interviews or retrospective verbal report (Ren 2014: 575), to provide bloggers' emic understandings. Additionally, cultural subtleties regarding the interpretation of memes and emojis in the Chinese online compliments might bring challenges to non-Chinese readers. Moreover, the data collected in the present study were limited in number due to availability. Future studies need to involve a larger scale of dataset, ideally from different social media platforms, to provide more comprehensive insights into the meaning-making and pragmatic functions of memes and emojis.

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