

A Study on the Role of Internet Emoticons in Business Communication from the Perspective of Symbolic Interactionism

By Li Xu^{}, Xinning Yang[‡] & Suping Tian[°]*

Emoticons break down the traditional text communication and spread quickly across the Internet, becoming an indispensable network communication tool. They make up for the lack of non-verbal information in Internet communication, dispel the communication gap between the disseminator and the audience. Along with the advancement of information technology, many a business communication has changed from the traditional offline face-to-face communication to the virtual online kind. In daily life, due to the ritualistic, profit-oriented and transactional characteristics of business communication, emoticons in the customer service communication of the e-commerce platform are somewhat different from personal one. This paper selects 4 typical conversation texts from Taobao customer service to support the present case study. According to Mead and Blumer's symbolic interactionism, it analyses the role of emoticons used in business conversations as well as people's motivations behind. On the basis of analyses, it attempts to summarize the role of emoticons in business communication and the problems existing in emoticons usage. The results demonstrate that emoticons can show professionalism and business etiquette, construct a communicator's business self-image, influence interpersonal mutual understanding so as to improve the accuracy and efficiency of business communication, and enhance group identification.

Keywords: role of emoticons, non-verbal expressions, symbolic interactionism, business communication, customer service

Introduction

The Internet has enriched people's intercommunication and become a real catalyst in the use of emoticons. Besides text communication online, Chinese people, especially young individuals, are addicted to using emoticons to express their views and emotions. Netizens communicate each other with emoticons in chat software like QQ, WeChat or in internet forums like Baidu Post Bar and MicroBlog. Emoticons have gradually become an indispensable part of social network. In April 2015, Tencent released "The Emoticon Report of Chinese Netizens" that QQ sent more than 533.8 billion emoticons in 2014, and more than 90 percent of the 800 million QQ users used emoticons in chatting. Emoticons are not only popular nationwide, but also attract people's increasing attention abroad.

^{*}Associate Professor, The School of Foreign Languages, Dalian University of Technology, China.

[‡]Graduate Student, The School of Foreign Languages, Dalian University of Technology, China.

[°]Associate Professor, The School of Foreign Languages, Dalian University of Technology, China.

According to Adobe's Emoji Trend Report released in July 2019, 65% of users agree they feel more convenient in expressing emotions by means of emoticons as opposed to verbalising them in phone conversations. Therefore, emoticons are widely used in virtual communication.

This paper contains 5 parts which support the author's points of view. Thus, the first part presents the research background, and announces the aims and the significance of the study; the second part looks into theoretical research models, like Mead and Blumer's symbolic interactionism, both emoticons study and business communication study; and the third part briefly presents the research methodology. Furthermore, while including conversation texts of Taobao customer service, the fourth part makes up the main body of the paper which discusses the role and significance of emoticons used in business conversations as well as people's motivations behind to finally round off with the fifth part which summarizes the role of emoticons in business communication, and brings forward problems and suggestions on the use of emoticons in business communications.

Research Background and Significance

Research Background

With the rapid development of the Internet and social software, emoticons have gradually turned into diversified, complex and dynamic structures, which meet the various needs of people of different ages surfing on Internet. The first category of emoticon development is static emoticons represented by character emoticons, kaomoji and emoji. The history of emoticons can be traced back to 1982 when Professor Farman in Carnegie Mellon University used the ASCII character ": -)", a smiley, to represent agreement on an electronic bulletin board. This smiley placed 90 degrees counterclockwise becomes the first character emoticon, which breaks away from the restriction that only language can be used in online communications. However, due to the limited types of combination of the keyboard characters, character emoticons can't convey complex nonverbal information. In 1998 a Chinese Dou Weiwei created the multilingual, horizontal symbolic combination of emoticons called "kaomoji". Kaomoji spread widely due to its vivid imitation of human expressions, richness of expressing information and creativity, and developed into the first generation of extremely popular emoticons. In 1997 Japanese Shigetaka Kurita developed "emoji" in NTTDOCOMO, and emoji became known to the world in 1999. At first, Emoji were only used on docomo501i series mobile phones. In 2012, Au company and DoCoMo company unified the style of Emoji. Later, Emoji started to be widely used around the world when Android and iPhone began to use Emoji. Unlike the previous kaomoji, emoji no longer rely on characters, but convey a group of visual and nonverbal information in the way of picture.

The second category is dynamic emoticons with mixed picture and text, marked by the appearance of GIF. On December 1, 2006, Wang Maomao, an animation major student of Communication University of China, created the "Tuzki"

series of GIF, which is considered to be the earliest GIF. "Tuzki" quickly went viral on the Internet after its launch, sparking a trend of producing animated GIF.

Then came the meme, which can be still pictures or animated GIFs. Netizen's self-made memes are mostly made from pictures of popular celebrities, cartoons and movies, and some match with words to express specific feelings. The pictures are mostly funny and ironic, and the words that the Netizens put on the pictures tend to be like hitting the nail on the head, which can skilfully summarize people's emotions.

The commercialization of emoticons is the sign of its maturity. With the popularity of emoticons, the commercial platform developing emoticons has attracted increasing attention, therefore providing a good space for the production and dissemination of emoticons. Taking WeChat as an example, Tencent launched WeChat emoticons open platform in July 2015. Everyone can upload self-designed emoticons and users are encouraged to pay for the use of emoticons by rewarding the authors, which greatly attracts professional designers and even design companies to involve in the creation of emoticons. In turn, the maturity and development of the emoticon industry chain has also contributed to the prosperity of the emoticon culture to some extent.

The form and content of emoticons are developing towards richness, inclusiveness and customization, and their value is gradually changing from non-profit to commercialization. In addition, with the development of the Internet and modern communication tools, the range of emoticon use has been expanding. On the Internet, emoticons will appear in any place where Netizens communicate with each other, like in comments and posts in micro-blog or in text messages in QQ or WeChat. Besides, emoticons are also used in business communication. People use emoticons at work in enterprise applications like Dingding and Tencent conference. Emoticons are also frequently used in customer service communication on e-commerce platforms such as Taobao and Jingdong at home or Amazon and eBay abroad. However, there are many differences between the use of emoticons in informal chat and in business communication. Business communication, as the name suggests, implies any act of communication between business organizations and individuals in business activities. Influenced by the professional, transactional, profit-oriented and ritualistic nature of business communication, the characteristics and principles of the emoticon use in business communication as well as people's motivation for using them are in some way different from those in the personal chat.

The customer service communication means that the customer service personnel uses online chat tools (WeChat, QQ, etc.) to communicate with customers, to provide services for customers, to deal with customers' complaints and doubts so as to achieve successful transactions. The quality of customer service communication determines whether a business organization can operate smoothly and achieve business success. The customer service is usually divided into three categories: pre-sale customer service, in-sale customer service and after-sale customer service. The kind of customer service directly offered to consumers is one of the important criteria to determine whether the service quality of e-commerce is qualified or not.

Taobao is one of the best-known e-commerce platforms. Shopping in Taobao online stores has become a daily commercial activity for most people. This paper takes Taobao customer service as an example to study the role of emoticons used in customer service communication. From April to May in 2021, a survey was conducted on the use of emoticons in Taobao customer service among college students in some universities in China by disseminating an online questionnaire. A total of 331 questionnaires were released to college students from Dalian University of Technology, Dalian Maritime University, Central China Normal University and other universities. 331 questionnaires were collected with a recovery rate of 100% and 330 valid questionnaires were selected with an effective recovery rate of 99%. Through this survey, the data of 330 questionnaires were analysed, and the required data were visualized. The questionnaire shows the top three emoticons most commonly used by customer service are 🙄🤔😄, while college students most often use 😄🙄😄. And the other 4 aspects of emoticon usage are shown in the following charts:

Figure 1. Frequency of College Student Using Emoticons

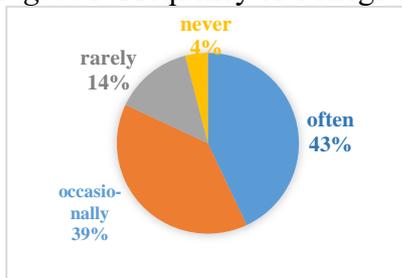
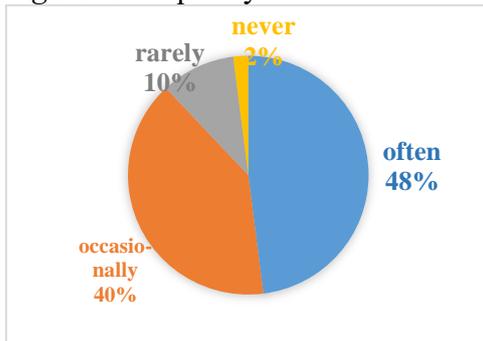


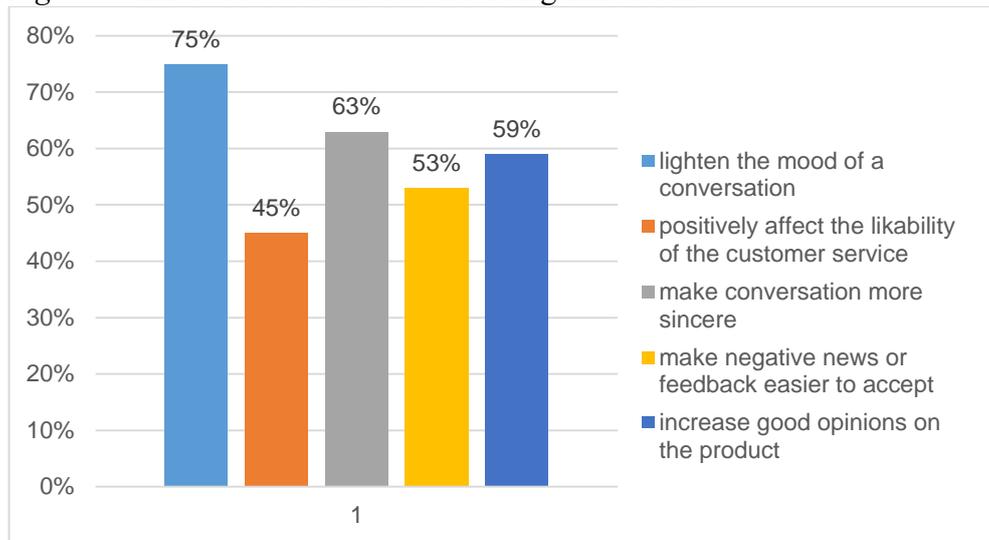
Figure 1 shows that 43% of college students often use emoticons in communication with Taobao customer service, and 39% of college students occasionally use emoticons.

Figure 2. Frequency of Customer Service Using Emoticons



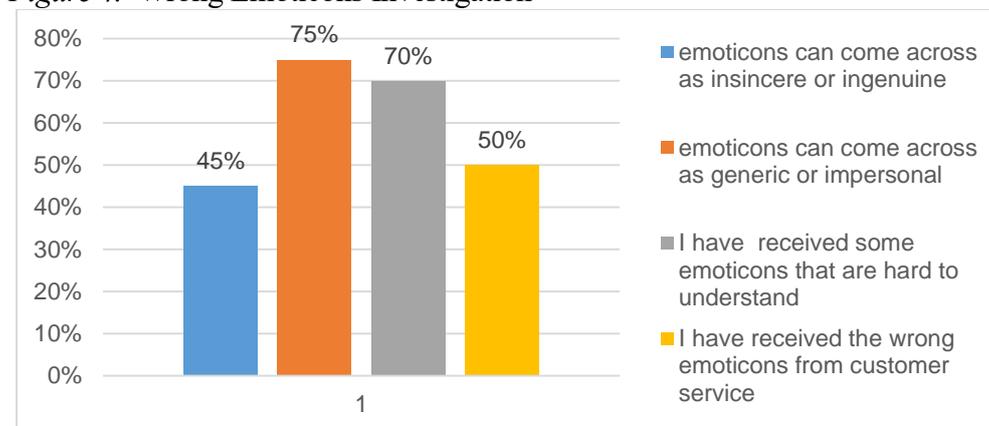
As shown in Figure 2, 48% of college students think that the customer service often uses emoticons in communication.

Figure 3. Effect of Customer Service Using Emoticons



As shown in Figure 3, 59% of college students think that when emoticons are used in customer service communication, they will increase customers' favourable impression of the product, and 75% of them think that the use of emoticons makes the atmosphere of communication more relaxed.

Figure 4. Wrong Emoticons Investigation



As shown in Figure 4, about 50% of college students have ever received the wrong emoticons from customer service.

Research Purpose and Significance

Domestic research on the function and significance of emoticons is mostly focused on the perspective of linguistics, journalism and information communication, while there is little research on the function of emoticons in business communication. Therefore, we aim to study the specific features of emoticons usage in professional communication. Besides, with a view to improving communication efficiency and avoiding cases of misuses, it feels necessary to

study how to use emoticons effectively. The research has its own significance both theoretically and practically in the hope of gaining some useful insights into the study of emoticons in Chinese business communication. Theoretically, this study analyses the use of emoticons from the perspective of the combinations of social linguistics, social psychology and business communication. It employs Symbolic Interactionism as effective and appropriate theoretical foundation. What's more, it puts emphasis on business communication, e-commerce in particular. The research of natural online conversations among Taobao customer service would further compensate for the scarcity of research on emoticons in business contexts. Practically, by pointing out the role of emoticons as well as the misuse of emoticons, it can arouse people's awareness of the appropriate emoticons use in business communication and assist people to effectively and successfully communicate in business situations. Besides, the study of the misuse of emoticons and the suggestions of reducing the misuse can also bring some enlightenments to successful business communication in practice.

Literature Review

Overview of Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism as a concept was formulated by Herbert Blumer, but founded by George Mead. From a socio-psychological perspective, it focuses on small-scale interpersonal relations, the nature of interaction, the dynamic patterns of social action and social relationship. Symbolic interactionism is any interaction between human beings via symbols such as words, definitions, roles, gestures, rituals etc. Whatever the form of interaction takes, there emerges a particular situation. In this theory, individuals are viewed as active constructors of their own conducts to interpret, evaluate, define and map out their own actions rather than being passive receivers influenced by outside forces. This approach stresses on the process by which individuals make decisions and form opinions.

Basic Principles of Symbolic Interactionism

(1) *Mead's Early Views*

According to Mead (1962), human thought, experience and conduct are essentially social. Symbols impose particular meanings on objects and these meanings are constructed and reconstructed in the process of social interaction. Symbolic interaction is necessary since man has no instincts to control his behaviour. He is not genetically programmed to react automatically to particular stimuli. In order to survive he has to find a medium of interaction with others and symbols fill the lacuna. Meaning is imposed on the world of nature via symbols, and human interaction with is therein made possible. Mead defines a symbol as the stimulus whose response is given in advance. He argues that the individual develops a concept of self by the process of role taking. By placing himself in the position of others he is able to look back upon himself. Mead claims that the idea

of a self can only develop if the individual can get outside himself in such a way as to become an object to himself.

(2) Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism

Blumer (1969) argues that the theory of symbolic interaction is based on the fact that group members use the same set of symbols and can understand the interactive meaning of these symbols. Blumer also puts forward the three premises of the classical "symbolic interactionism". The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings of things have for them; the second premise is that the meaning of these things is assigned to people through their interactions with other members of the society; the third premise is that the meaning of things is modified and supplemented by repeated social interactions.

(3) Ten Elements of Symbolic Interactionism

Not only does Symbolic Interactionism have the root in social sciences, but it also contains the genes of human science. It is a comprehensive product touching on sociology, psychology, semiotics, pedagogy, philosophy and other disciplines. It is a theoretical collection covering a wide range of disciplines. They always try to interpret a particular situation rather than a set of general situations.

There are 10 elements to help us interpret particular situations: 1. The construction of people's own actions which are deliberate, intentional and creative. 2. The attribute and constructed meanings of people's situations and behaviours; imposed meanings on situations. 3. The subjective meanings and the symbols, together with their systems (e.g., language and communication), by which they are produced and represented. 4. The understanding of individuals' definitions in their terms, i.e., in any situation there are many definitions of a situation's multiple realities; the self is a social product, constructed through the interaction with significant others, which occurs in relation to multiple "reference groups". 5. The negotiation process by which meanings are constructed. 6. The natural, social context/ environment/ setting in understanding meaning and meaning construction. 7. Unique and idiographic situations and individuals. 8. The nature of a career—the moving perspective in which people regard their own and others' lives, based on the meanings which are being formed; a career includes notions of commitment and identity. 9. Rich and detailed accounts of the situation and participants' intention and behaviour. 10. "Emic" rather than "etic" analysis - generating meaning through participants' subjective constructed accounts.

Overview of Emoticons

Definition and Characteristics of Emoticons

At present, there is no unified explanation on the definition of emoticons in academic circles. Based on literature reviews and previous research results, this paper makes the following conclusive remarks on the concept of emoticons: An

emoticon refers to a new symbol that appears and spreads widely on the Internet, and that typically represents a facial expression or suggests an attitude or emotion. It exists in various variants like character emoticons, kaomoji, emoji, stickers and memes, etc. The characteristics of emoticons include intuitiveness, ambiguity, vividness, communicativeness, and productiveness.

(1) *Intuitiveness*. The emoticons used in social media are patterned and symbolic human expressions, such as happiness, shyness and sadness. When it comes to expressing a sender's feelings, emoticons are more intuitive than words. For example, an emoticon 🍷 can make others easily understand your feeling of gratitude or affection. And you can also make others understand you are frightened by sending a certain emoticon 😱 instead of typing any words.

(2) *Ambiguity*. The linguist Saussure believes that the things represented by language symbols and the forms of the symbols themselves can change with the passage of time, so language is constantly changing and developing. As a kind of symbol, some emoticons are made by using a variety of rhetorical methods such as metaphor, satire and pun, so they are somewhat complex for some people to understand. When emoticons are used by the public, their primary meanings may be distorted and changed. The users may interpret emoticons according to their cognitive experience, cultural background and existing knowledge. The meanings of emoticons are not always the same. For example, there are some controversies in the use of emoticon 😊. At the beginning, it was used to express "smile" and conveyed the meaning of "friendship". However, it gradually evolved to be an equivalent for "apathetic, disapprove, nothing to say" and "I don't want to talk to you any more".

(3) *Vividness*. Emoticons have been changing from simple to complex, from one-fold to diversified. They are able to express feelings vividly and have more artistic appeal. For example, the emoticon "laughing out loud" 😂 expresses a set of complex emotions, including impotence, self-mockery, ridiculousness and embarrassment, which is difficult to be rendered by our facial expression. In addition, the first emoticon ": -)" must leave a novel and interesting impression on people to tell the meaning of agreement. Nowadays if people want to express "agreement", they can also send a simple emoticon 🙌. The "ok" gesture has more equivalents with the development of emoticons, like a cute bear or rabbit or other animated characters, which offer conversations more interesting and lovely sense. Therefore, emoticons have a powerful, visual and vivid impact, and make dialogues more interesting and lighten the mood of a conversation.

(4) *Communicativeness*. Emoticons are usually auxiliary means of language, they help the expression be more accurate and in agreement with people's true feelings. For example, in a conversation between lovers, the girlfriend says, - Do you think I'm wrong? Do you really disagree? The boyfriend says, - You are right. I always take your words as the truth, there is no disagreement 🐶! Without doge emoticon, we might think the boy agrees with the girl. However, with a doge emoticon, the meaning is just the opposite, because the doge emoticon means irony and - Just kidding. Don't take it seriously. This emoticon uses humor to express irony or the opposite meaning literally. With the help of the doge emoticon, the boy expresses his disagreement humorously and also conveys —although we have different

opinions, I like you and you are adorable. From this we can see that this emoticon can reduce embarrassment when rejecting others or giving an undesirable feedback, and also make others more willing to accept the negative news or feedback. Therefore, emoticons can help communication and make it go smoothly.

(5) *Productiveness*. The production of emoticons is becoming more and more popular, and possible for any Netizens to create and publish their own emoticons. Some designers create emoticons of celebrities or cartoon characters according to the latest events, and they upload them in the official emoticon market of WeChat, QQ and other chat software. At the same time, some chat software users can create their own emoticons as well. For example, the latest version 7.0.3 of WeChat adds a self-created emoticon function. Users can take pictures of themselves and mix their pictures with words to produce their customized emoticons.

Pragmatic Functions of Emoticons

Verbal symbols are the leading factors in communication, while the non-verbal symbols are important aids to the verbal one. Non-verbal symbols in social communication, such as facial expressions, gestures and actions, can express people's emotions, and are of great value and significance for any act of communication and interaction. According to the research of American psychologist Albert Mehrabian, only 7% of verbal information transmission is effective in social communication, and nonverbal information transmission accounts for 93%.

Emoticons are a commonly used auxiliary means for verbal language in current internet communication, which, to a great extent, play the role of body languages communication (Yu and Qin, 2011), create a space similar to any face-to-face environment, to make up for the lack of non-verbal information in social media. They effectively integrate verbal communication with non-verbal communication in the virtual world, and eliminate possible misunderstandings between the sender and the receiver and strengthen the emotional interaction with each other.

The first function of emoticons is to promote harmonious interpersonal relationships (Guo, 2019). Internet communication differs from face-to-face conversation, and the biggest difference is that in Internet communication, sometimes we will communicate with people we have never met. At this time, a cute emoticon can bring a relaxing atmosphere to the communication. A simple observation of the emoticons people use can help us make a preliminary judgement of their personality, which is beneficial for further conversation. Sometimes when it comes to sensitive topics, an emoticon can also resolve the awkwardness of both sides in communication. As we all know, good communication is based on cooperation. When there is disagreement or divergence of opinions, emoticons can help ease the tension in a gentle way. With the help of vivid and interesting emoticons, the relationship of the two sides can get along well with each other.

The second function of the emoticon is that it can help accurately express the sender's ideas and feelings (Guo, 2019). When people communicate with each other, they usually discuss the same topic and exchange their ideas on the topic,

but sometimes they can also associate with other things in their minds and generate their emotions which is not shown literally. In face-to-face conversations, we can help ourselves by a variety of para verbal elements, like hearing each other's voice, seeing each other's expressions, making judgments about each other's emotions. However, in Internet communication, we type words to communicate and we can judge people's emotions only through words and contexts, so it is difficult to judge correctly each other's true emotion only from contexts. In this case, the use of emoticons is just like the message sender's facial expressions emerging in the receiver's brain. According to the emoticons felt, the receiver can grasp the emotion of the sender and try to make an appropriate and decent answer to great extent.

The third function of the emoticon is that it can add joy to the act of communication (Guo, 2019). As we all know, humour can build a good interpersonal relationship. From the developing trend of emoticons, people tend to use humorous and cute emoticons to create a friendly and pleasant mood for a conversation. Emoticons are more expressive than words, bringing visual enjoyment to people and stimulating people's brain to make them happy. A cheerful mood also makes the conversation go smoothly. Therefore, emoticons imitate human body languages, and express the humour more vividly so as to improve inter-communication.

Overview of Business Communication

A Definition of Business Communication

Communication is the process of sending and receiving messages through verbal or nonverbal means, including speech, or oral communication; writing and graphical representations (such as infographics, maps, and charts); and signs, signals, and behaviour. Simply put, communication is said to be "the creation and exchange of meaning." James Carey, media critic and theorist defined communication as "a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed" in his book *Communication as Culture*, presuming that we define our reality through communicating our experience with others.

Communication is an essential element in the success of any business. The process of transferring information from one person to another, within and outside the business environment, is termed as business communication. The term business communication is derived from general communication which is associated with business activities. In other words, communication between business parties or people for business-related tasks is considered as business communication. Business communication is any communication used to build partnerships, intellectual resources, to promote an idea, a product, service, or an organization – with the objective of creating value for your business.

Characteristics of Business Communication

Compared with personal communication, business communication has many different characteristics. First, business communication requires that both sides have expertise in what they communicate across. Professional background is a prerequisite for any effective act of business communication. Second, procedures for business communication usually have some customary practices or hard and fast rules. When conducting business communication, communication habits should be understood beforehand. Third, the purpose of business is to make a profit. In the process of business communication, all kinds of opinions and suggestions are included in the consideration of economic interests, rather than simply being analysed and elaborated from the technical perspective. Fourth, business communication is duty behaviour. People should reduce the adverse impact of personal background and emotion on business activities, and business communication should be based on the case rather than the person. Fifth, business communication emphasizes etiquette and image, and the use of business language. Sixth, in business communication, communicators do not communicate as individuals, but as agents of organizations. Communicators must agree with the organization's stand (Tan, 2016).

Methodology

This paper mainly adopts the research methods of virtual questionnaires and text analysis.

Virtual Questionnaires

The study targets 20 university students who use TaoBao as an online shopping platform. Snowball sampling as research path is used. The research method at the first stage is a virtual questionnaire according to different research purposes, e.g., the respondents' selection, the selection of conversation texts, etc., and 330 questionnaire replies are available.

More exactly this study adopts the virtual pastoral survey method and chooses the customer service represented by Taobao e-commerce platform as the research target. Taobao is an e-commerce platform with extremely high personal privacy. The communication information with customer service is confidential, only known between the customer and Taobao. In general, it is difficult for others to get personal communication records. Therefore, this paper mainly uses snowball sampling in the selection of respondents. That is, the respondents are selected according to the proposed research purpose, and then the respondents are interviewed and investigated. The respondents are selected among college students. Firstly, through the distribution of questionnaires, we obtain their basic information and their characteristics of emoticons usage. Then, we sort out respondents who are suitable for further study and add them as WeChat friends so as to maintain a long-term and stable contact with them. According to age, gender

and other criteria, 20 Taobao users are selected as respondents. After obtaining their consent, we collect their chat texts with Taobao customer service, and the follow-up interviews are conducted to obtain the first-hand information of this study.

Specifically, the questionnaire contains the following types of questions. Firstly, respondents' basic information, like name, gender, phone number, university and subject, is needed for follow-up contact. Secondly, we investigate their characteristics of emoticons usage in conversation with Taobao customer service representatives (CSR) including frequency and preferred emoticons. Then, we draw attention to the CSR's usage preference of emoticons and their frequency of usage. Finally, in an attempt to know the effects of emoticons used by CSR, we give them several choices involving both good side and bad side caused by mistaken usage, enabling them choose their appropriate ones. The results are shown in the first part, research background, of this paper in graphical forms.

The eligible questionnaire replies were identified according to the following inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion criteria:

- 1) The data for further analyzing characteristics and effects of emoticons usage from respondents who have middle or high frequency of using Taobao and emoticon could be extracted.
- 2) The questionnaire studies university students aged from 18 to 23, focusing on their usage habits of and opinions on Emoticons in Taobao customer service communication. So no participants other than eligible undergraduate groups are included.

Exclusion criteria:

- 1) If the respondents skip more than 9 questions of the total 15 questions, i.e. 2/3 of the total, then the questionnaire should be invalid.
- 2) Questionnaires with continuously single option selected should be invalid. For example, select all B, or select half A and half B.
- 3) The selected options are regular, following a pattern like A, B, C, A, B, C should be excluded.
- 4) Trap questions are set in the questionnaire. If inconsistency happens in the results of the two questions, the questionnaire should be invalid.

Text Analysis

Text analysis refers to the analysis of the deep meaning behind the text content, and the in-depth search for the key information that can't be obtained from a surface reading. In this paper, symbolic interactionism is adopted as the theoretical guide for the text analysis. About 70 screenshots of TaoBao customer service conversations are obtained from 20 respondents. Through repeated analysis and comparison, the 4 most representative ones are selected among 58 available

screenshots of online conversation texts from 12 respondents. By the means of analysis, this study aims at exploring the role of emoticons used in business conversations as well as people's motivations behind their choices.

We choose 4 conversation texts, which present 4 different typical functions of emoticons usage in daily business communication. In each text analysis, it consists of Chinese conversation between the CSR and the customer, the corresponding English translation of the Chinese conversation and the detail text analysis, in which the theory of symbolic interactionism, the typical features of business communication and the non-verbal expression meanings of emoticons are integrated to analyze the typical function of each emoticon in the conversation. And for the choice of 4 typical Chinese conversations, we consider more about the proper length, the proper emoticon usage between the CSR and the customer so that those elements form the typical emoticon function together in business communication.

Results and Discussion

Based on the characteristics of business communication, it can be inferred that the types of emoticons that can be used in business communication and the scope of emoticons usage should be limited — business people will also reduce the arbitrary use of emoticons, and the role of emoticons in business communication will be more targeted. This study selects 4 chat texts of online conversations between the customers and the customer service representatives (CSR). Under the guidance of symbolic interactionism, it analyses the roles of emoticons used in daily business conversations as well as their motivations behind. The texts below are all real and selected from about 70 screenshots of TaoBao shopping platform conversations provided by the 20 respondents selected.

Emoticons that Show Professionalism and Business Etiquette

例 1. 客服: 欢迎光临 XXX 店铺, 有任何问题可以联系客服咨询哦。😊

顾客: 请问我的这个商品什么时候可以发货?

客服: 感谢您的订单🙏! 由于订单量巨大, 仓库正在马不停蹄地打包商品, 我们会尽快发货的哦!

顾客: 好吧, 尽快哈!

English translation of Conversation 1:

The CSR: Welcome to XXX Shop! What can I do for you? 😊

The Customer: Would you tell me when my goods will be dispatched?

The CSR: Thank you for your order 🙏. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting because our shop has been overwhelmed by the recent large orders.

The goods are being packed quickly in order of payment. Your delivery will be arranged as soon as possible.

The Customer: Okay. As quickly as possible, please!

In *Man and Society*, American sociologist Blumer explains that the basic principle of symbolic interactionism is that, in groups, people have a set of common symbols and common understandings of these symbols (Wolf, 1985). Only when people have common understandings of these symbols can they interact with each other socially. Therefore, the premise of people's mutual understanding is to have a common meaning background or cultural background.

A "happy smile" emoticon is one of the most basic human expressions, and people of all cultures will interpret it as a friendly expression without the risk of misinterpretation. The emoticon "happy smile" 😊 is one of the most basic emoticons online, which can be used at any time to reduce the seriousness of the tone and create a friendly atmosphere. The essence of the emoticon is an Internet auxiliary communication means with the function of facial expression, which is equivalent to body language in face-to-face communication. In Internet communication, we can't see each other, but through emoticons, we can associate what the other's emoticon is with of the specific type of emoticon it expresses. In this conversation, when the emoticon "happy smile" appears, the customer will immediately reflect in his mind that the CSR is smiling at him, and he can feel the warmth and respect from the CSR. Moreover, the emoticon "happy smile" can dissolve the serious and embarrassing atmosphere caused by unfamiliarity at the beginning of the conversation and make the customer have a good impression about the store.

As we all know, business communication needs to be professional and polite. Using such a smiling face can increase the professionalism of customer service. Since the main purpose of customer service is to serve customers and to solve their problems, it is necessary to be polite to customers and take into account of customers' feelings. The emoticon "happy smile" will make customers feel as if a polite and professional CSR were greeting them with a smile, and customers will have more trust in the professionalism of the service.

The emoticon "blowing kisses of love" 😘 is used in this conversation to express the gratitude of the CSR towards the buyer for having placed an order and paid for it. Like the emoticon "happy smile", this emoticon is also a basic and unambiguous nonverbal expression, which is an imitation of human's action to blow kisses. People will interpret this action as affection and gratitude.

The above example analyses the functions of the two emoticons in the business conversation. The emoticon "happy smile" expresses welcome and friendliness, thus creating a relaxing atmosphere. The emoticon "blowing kisses of love" expresses appreciation and love. The appropriate use of two emoticons has improved the professionalism of the customer service because the professionalism, politeness and sincerity has been sent to the customer through emoticons by the CSR. Therefore, one function of emoticons is to help words convey feelings, emotions and attitudes, and to regulate the atmosphere so as to show the professionalism and etiquette in business communication.

Using Emoticons to Construct the Communicator's Business Self-image

例 2. 顾客发送链接

客服：欢迎光临，有什么可以帮助您？

小美人~芭蕉衬雨秋生动 罗窗恼破鸳鸯梦~

纳米丝仿生毛+加厚铝管+树脂实木刷杆

触感轻柔不扎脸，14 支刷型，一应俱全，为您打造精致妆容! 😊

顾客：快递是什么呀？

客服：小美人~我们家快递随机发邮政和中通呢。

因疫情原因，云南省德宏傣族景颇族自治州瑞丽市无法收寄哈，以及新疆~西藏~内蒙古地区仅支持邮政哈。

顾客：好的，谢谢 🙏

客服：不客气小美人，么么哒.

客服：



English translation of Conversation 2

The Customer sent a product link.

The CSR: Welcome! Can I help you, sweetie heart? This professional makeup brush kit contains 14 pcs made from nanowire synthetic hair, thick Aluminium tube and resin handle, which gives your face soft feeling, and creates exquisite makeup for you 😊.

The Customer: Which express company?

CSR: ZTO Express or EMS (Express Mail Service), little beauty~ Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the city of Ruili, Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province cannot offer service. And Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia only allow EMS.

Customer: All right, Thank you 🙏!

CSR: You are welcome, sweetie! Muah!

CSR: (Bit embarrassed!)



Mead, the founder of symbolic interactionism, claims that the interaction between people is essentially the interaction between social roles. When people construct their roles, they give others "self" information through various ways and symbols in the repeated social interaction with others. The individual develops a concept of self by the process of role taking. Emoticons can be understood as a

symbol representing the "self" behind the Internet. The type of emoticons that Netizens like to use can reflect the personality of "self" (Pan, 2020). The self is constructed through interaction with "significant others" which occurs in relation to multiple "reference groups". The emoticon "biting a rose" 🌹 is to imitate the expression of western gentlemen's high-flown inviting beauties to dance, but here it creates a relaxed and funny conversation atmosphere with a sense of humour, meaning "see how good I am, praise me quickly", so that it presents the CSR a witty and humorous image.

This kind of image is deepened by the emoticon - feeling so embarrassed, used by the CSR. Actually the CSR does not have to feel embarrassed because it's routine politeness for the girl customer to say - thank you! To tell the CSR she's satisfied with his (her) service. However, using such an exaggerated expression gives the customer a sense of fun, thus externalizing the humorous and witty image of the CSR so that the customer is attracted. When the customer sees this emoticon, she should be amused and may have a good impression on the CSR, therefore encouraging subsequent satisfactory comments on the store.

Normally in business communication, the social relations between the two sides are different. Sometimes the two sides may have equal status, such as communication between colleagues, and sometimes they may have an inferior status, such as communication between superiors and subordinates. There are different communication modes for different social relations, but no matter which communication mode it may be, both sides of the communication act will have specific expectations. Only when the business communication meets these expectations, can it be accepted by both sides, and the business communication can proceed smoothly. In the communication between superiors and subordinates, superiors hope to be ingratiated with and looked up to by subordinates, while subordinates hope to be respected and recognized by superiors. Therefore, subordinates can use positive emoticons to build a positive image of themselves, showing gratitude, modesty, earnestness, diligence, etc., to euphemistically please superiors, while superiors can use emoticons to maintain their social status and create an image of caring for subordinates. Through the function of emoticons to shape one's self-image, communication can meet the expectations of both sides and promote the smooth progress of business communication. In the above example, the customer can be regarded as the superior, while the CSR as the subordinate. Both the emoticon "biting a rose" and the emoticon "feeling so embarrassed" used by the CSR function in constructing the CSR's humorous and witty self-image. The motivation to use them is to please the girl customer and win her favour so as to leave her a satisfactory shopping experience.

Emoticons used to improve the Efficiency and Accuracy of Business Communication

例 3. 顾客：请问在吗？

客服：您好哈，小可爱！有什么可以帮助您的呢？

顾客：节后可以开始发货吗？

- 客服: 🤗亲, 受疫情影响, 节后需要根据疫情稳定后工厂进度、到货周期以及快递等进行沟通和判定, 暂时没办法确定具体时间。一旦可以, 仓库会尽快按订单顺序陆续安排发货的哦!
- 顾客: 嗯嗯。等发货这么久, 能多赠送个打气筒吗? 🤗
- 客服: 🤗
- 客服: 不过看在老顾客的情分, 我们可以给您本店优惠卷作为补偿。
- 顾客: 谢谢。好滴。

English translation of Conversation 3

The Customer: Hello! Anybody here?

The CSR: Hi, sweetheart! What can I do for you?

The Customer: Will my goods be dispatched once the Chinese New Year is over?

The CRS: We are not sure when to send packages now, honey 🤗. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to change the schedule according to the changes of production and delivery circle. But once possible, we promise to send packages in order of payments as soon as possible!

The Customer: Well, since I have been waiting for such a long time, can you gift one more bicycle pump? 🤗

The CRS: 🤗

The CRS: As you are a regular customer, we can give you a coupon as compensation.

The Customer: Ok, Thanks!

The emoticon "comforting" 🤗 is used together with words by the CSR to comfort the customer when he puts forward a requirement and service that the store cannot afford. When the customer sees this emoticon, he will definitely feel more comfortable, rather than feel total dissatisfaction. If the CSR uses inappropriate emoticons and words to express the refusal, it will inevitably give the customer a sense of disrespect. However, in this text, we can see that after seeing the emoticon —comforting, the customer is still bit unsatisfied and uncompromising, then asks an unreasonable requirement. The customer himself also feels he's unreasonable, so he delivers an emoticon "blowing kisses of love" 🤗 to express his gratitude in advance. Therefore, the CSR sends back an emoticon —smiling peacefully 🤗 to express his understanding and comfort to the customer. It shows that the CSR takes the customer' requirements seriously. Although the customer's requirement is a bit unreasonable, he tries to put himself in the customer's shoes, and has a sincere attitude to offer the customer a satisfactory service.

Symbolic Interactionism points out that the so-called meaning refers to people's understanding of natural or social things, the implication given to objects by people, and the spiritual content conveyed and communicated by human beings in the form of symbols. Human beings have the ability to think, and people respond to social situations according to the meaning of things to them. Social interaction can be carried out smoothly only when both sides of the interaction can determine and understand their mutual situations and can communicate with each other by symbols. However, people must have a common understanding of the

meaning of the symbols, and the understanding of the meaning of the symbols is generated during the interaction. That's to say, effective social interaction depends on understanding each other's situation. In this example, the CSR and the customer try to understand each other and establish a common meaning background, so their communication can flow smoothly, which leads to series of interactions with each other and the possibility of developing a further relationship. Through the interaction of symbols, together with words, certain meanings are resonated and mutual understanding is enhanced.

Mead believes that the human mind is not a fixed organism, but a process of continuous interpretation, reflection and judgment of experience. An individual responds to other individuals or objects because these people or objects have meaning for him, but these meanings are neither socially nor culturally fixed or determined. They can change in the specific context in which people interact (Xu, 2016). Mead's discussion of the open nature of meaning to some extent explains why the relationship between the customer and the CSR can develop smoothly in the end because they can understand each other, especially the CSR. With the development of their conversation, by using emoticons the CSR and the customer make each other understand the situation and each other's meaning accurately. Therefore, in business communication, when one side has to refuse the other side's request, he can use emoticons to express refusal - so as to reduce the embarrassment, and at the same time help each other catch the changing meanings with the conversation development, therefore improve the efficiency of the business communication. But at the same time, if two sides use emoticons wrongly or misunderstand the emoticons, they may fail to have the common meaning background and reduce their mutual understanding.

In the external business communication, such as the one between business organizations and customers or buyers and sellers, when they share the common understanding of the emoticons that they use, they can have a good mutual understanding. The mutual understanding between the two sides can lead to good communication results, that are mutual benefits and win-win results. If the buyer and the seller do not agree to make any compromise, it will lead to a deadlock. The more mutual understanding they have, the better they can take a win-win attitude to conduct business communication, and the better they can find a solution that satisfies the interests of both sides. Therefore, the use of emoticons in the business communication can influence interpersonal mutual understanding.

Emoticons Used to Improve Group Identification

例 4. 客服: 欢迎小主的到来, 本店 1212 年货节, 会员无门槛红包 15 元, 满 300 减 30, 上不封顶! 🍷 “神仙水”、“悦诗风吟”更有多重惊喜优惠!

客服: 感谢您的购买! 小店会尽快发货的, 请您确认订单信息。

顾客: 收货地址写错了! 😞

客服: 哦哦 😊 我这边可以帮您更改, 您把新地址发我就好了。

English translation of Conversation 4

The CSR: Welcome to our shop! Have fun in double 12 New Year's shopping festival! Each one with our membership can receive a no-threshold red envelope of 15 Yuan! 30 Yuan off on consumption of every 300, there is no cap! 🤗 "SK-II", "Innisfree" and other products have surprising discounts!

The CSR: Thank you for your purchase! We will send your express parcel as soon as possible. Please confirm your order.

The Customer: I wrote my delivery address wrong! 😞

The CSR: Oh! 😊 I can help you correct it. Just send your correct delivery address to me.

The emoticon "laughing out loud" 😂 is one of the most commonly used emoticons, and it is also rated as the most popular emoticon in the world. In this context, the customer uses the emoticon "laughing out loud" to express his self-mockery and embarrassment. The CSR catches the customer's meaning and uses it again to represent his understanding and his other meaning of "it's ok." The emoticon "laughing out loud" can express a variety of emotions and appeals, including happiness, sarcasm, and goodwill. The current relationship among people is quite weak, and people feel it difficult to use words to express their very complex emotions. Psychologists say that the emoticon "laughing out loud" really reflects people's complex emotions like helplessness, self-mockery, etc. in their inner world.

The transmission pattern of this emoticon - laughing out loud 😂 can also be explained by symbolic interactionism. Symbolic Interactionism holds that things or objects cannot influence individual behaviour by themselves. Instead, they can influence individual behaviour through their symbolic meanings, which is derived from social interaction. The meaning of emoticons is agreed upon during the interpersonal interaction. After having learnt the meaning of emoticons, individuals can conduct self-interaction and develop the "self", and then externalize the learning results in the next interpersonal interaction, so that individuals can gain higher recognition in the interpersonal interaction.

Specifically, when the customer and the CSR communicate with each other, the "I" of the customer chooses to use the "laughing out loud" under the internal coordination of impulsion and reason. On receiving the emoticon, the CSR will first produce the same interpretation result with the customer from the interactive context of two sides. Then, the behaviour of the customer forms a "me" image in the mind of the CSR, which is "humorous and follows the trend of the Internet". For the customer, if this - "me" image conforms to his psychological expectation, the "me" image will be unified with "I" as "self", and tends to use emoticons more frequently in social media. For the CSR, if the "me" image of the customer causes him to have positive emotional experience, he will produce imitation behaviour out of herd psychology and also use the "laughing out loud" in his social behaviour.

The emoticon "cheering" 🙌 is supposed to show the customer's support and praise for the product after the product is used by the customer, but the CSR sends

the emoticon, which means that the CSR stands in the position of the customer and suggests that the product is popular among customers. When the customer sees this emoji, it is easy for the customer to be empathetic. Therefore, the emoticon "cheering" 🥳 is used by the CRS here to express the unprecedented level of preferential offer, stimulate the positive emotion of customers, and make them interested in knowing about the preferential activities of other products. This emoticon is often used in Taobao customer service to recommend products. This emoticon transmission mode is so widely spread in customer service.

The emoticons "laughing out loud" and "cheering" are both widely used in social interaction because the symbolic meanings they represent are recognized and agreed upon by people from different backgrounds. Although each person has a different meaning and cognitive background, emoticons can interact effectively in different cultures and be endowed with the same meaning by different people, which is conducive for the establishment of people's common meaning or cultural background. Through the establishment of the common meaning background or cultural background, the amount of effective interaction between people will also increase, and it will also increase the sense of belonging and identity of the group.

Symbolic interactionism holds that society is not an objective entity, but a network of social members who interact with each other. Individuals give meaning to their own and others' actions through the use of symbols. Mead actually sees society as a phenomenon of composition, arising from the interaction between individuals, and because of this, society can be transformed and reorganized in the process of mind and self-activity. In short, Mead believes that society is the formation pattern of common activities, and maintains and changes its state by means of symbolic interaction (Xu, 2016). Therefore, the use of the same emoticons in the whole society is favourable to building people's common meaning background and increasing people's sense of belonging and identity.

In business communication, the wide use of emoticons will also bring about mutual understanding within or between organizations and build the same meaning background so as to enhance the sense of group identity and belonging or intensify the sense of identity between people or organizations. When members have a high sense of identity and belonging to the organization, internal business communication will be smoother, so as to achieve better teamwork and more harmonious interpersonal relationships and stimulate the creativity of members. When there is a better sense of identity between business organizations and business organizations, or between business organizations and consumers, the external business communication will be smoother, which can enhance the good image of the organization, expand the external communication of the organization, and provide a better development space for the organization.

Conclusions

The Role of Emoticons in Business Communication

From the above analyses and findings, it can be concluded that the functions

of emoticons used in the 4 texts are to show professionalism and business etiquette; similarly, they shape one's self-image; promote interpersonal mutual understanding so as to increase accuracy and efficiency of business communication; and improve group identification.

First, emoticons can show people's professionalism and compliance with business etiquette. When people, as agents of their business organizations, use appropriate emoticons to express their caring for customers, the customers can feel the professionalism, politeness and sincerity of business organizations through the emoticons. Like the emoticon - happy smile in the first text, the receiver can associate the emoticon with the sender and a face-to-face communication with the sender in his mind. The positive meanings of the emoticons are endowed with the sender and when the receiver believes in the professionalism of the sender, he will trust the sender's organization as well.

Secondly, emoticons can construct people's different self-images for different social relations in business communication. The purpose of self-image construction is to meet the other side's expectation and achieve the purpose of smooth business communication. The essence of interaction between people is the interaction of social roles. Business communication is often accompanied by unequal status between the two sides, but in the democratic society, the relationship between superiors and subordinates is no longer one of command and obedience. When the person with higher status puts forward a request to the person with lower status, for example, when the leader asks the subordinate to do something, he adds a smiling emoticon at the end of the speech to show his respect for the subordinate, or he adds a "come on" emoticon at the end of the sentence to establish a clear image of consideration for the subordinate. Subordinates also use emoticons in the dialogue with their superiors, such as using the "thanks" emoticons to show the subordinate's image is polite, modest and sincere. When communicating with colleagues with equal status or between the CSR and the customer in Text 2, people often use cute and exaggerated emoticons to create a relaxed chatting atmosphere and present a kind and amiable image, or using trendy, humorous emoticons to shape a humorous and witty self-image.

Thirdly, the use of emoticons can help reach the efficiency and accuracy of business communication. Emoticons can accurately express emotions and meanings and avoid the ambiguous explanation caused by language. They can be a means of saving time for typing words. In the modern society, the relationship between people is weak, and it's difficult for people to understand many of each other's emotions in words, like embarrassment, it can be clearly expressed in the shortest time with an emoticon. In business communication, the proper use of emoticons can avoid language misunderstanding. For example, in Text 3 the CSR can't satisfy the customer's request, so they reply with emoticons "comforting" and "smiling peacefully" separately, together with words, to express that although the CSR can't meet the customer's need completely, the CSR has tried his best. Therefore, by using emoticons, people not only save the time for mutual understanding, but also help increase the accuracy of mutual communication.

Fourthly, emoticons can enhance the group's identity. Symbolic interactionism points out that only when both sides can understand each other's personal situation

and communicate with each other symbolically, can social interaction be carried out smoothly. People must have a common understanding of the meaning of symbols. People understand each other on the premise that they have a common meaning background or cultural background. However, in internal business communication, not all people have the same experience and background. Many of them have different backgrounds, ages, cultures and education, which leads to the situation that they cannot totally understand each other. However, people's thoughts will change by social interaction. When a symbol is given a common meaning in a group through social interaction, the group will have a resonance in meaning through such symbol interaction, promote a benign interaction, and increase the group's sense of belonging and identity. The high degree of organizational identification can lead to better internal business communication, so as to achieve the purpose of excellent teamwork, harmonious interpersonal relationship and continuous innovation. So the strong sense of group identity can also lead to smooth external business communication like in Text 4.

Problems and Suggestions on the use of Emoticons in Business Communication

Unclear Boundaries of Emoticons

A taboo in business communication is to use emoticons regardless of the receiver and the occasion. Many emoticons are entertaining, which is considered inappropriate and not serious in relatively serious occasions. One should send different kinds of emoticons to different people. For older communicators, they may not be so receptive to emoticons and may not understand some novel emoticons. Therefore, it is more appropriate to use the official emoticons in the chat software when chatting with them. In addition, one had better choose some emoticons with basic emotions and avoid using emoticons with rich connotations. For younger communicators, the use of novel emoticons is preferred. Secondly, some ambiguous emoticons, such as the emoticon "smiling" 😊 containing both the positive meaning of "smile" and the derogatory meaning of "sneer and sarcasm", should be avoided in business communication because they will cause misunderstanding and failure to achieve successful communication. Finally, in business communication, it is advisable not to reply only with emoticons unaccompanied by words. Emoticons are only an auxiliary means of language expression, and cannot completely replace words. Properly written explanations can reflect a person's professionalism and their serious attitude.

Abuse of Emoticons

In business communication, people usually use procedural language to show their professionalism. However, if communication is carried out in complete accordance with the prepared script without any flexible adjustment to meet others' demand, it will not create trustworthiness and sincerity. If the emoticon becomes a perfunctory and polite tool, it will lose its value of expressing meaning. When others keep seeing the same emotions appear each time as expected, they will feel

bored and rebellious. This situation often appears in the chat of Taobao customer service. The customer service has been using the same words and emoticons all the time. This will not keep customers, but it would rather create the feeling that the service is perfunctory and customers will eventually build a negative image of the store. Therefore, sincerity is the most important principle when communicating with others, and the same principle should be followed when using emoticons.

Ineffective Use of Emoticons

In business communication, many employees still send emoticons at will, just like in personal communication. They always send some positive emoticons in any situation. The result is that the emoticons do not have any effect in sentences, but are redundant. A very important feature of business communication is profit-oriented, i.e., the purpose of business activities is to make profit. More specifically, the purpose of business communication is to achieve the pre-set goals through effective communication so as to enable the successful operation of business activities. Business communication has definite goals and should achieve the predetermined goals as quickly as possible. Therefore, when using emoticons in business communication, it is more necessary to pay attention to the purpose of using the emoticons and think about the most appropriate emoticon in the context. Don't say useless words and send emoticons with no specific purpose. At the same time, pay attention to the accuracy of the use of emoticons and don't send emoticons at random.

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