

EMOJI IN R/HIKIKOMORI

A Corpus-assisted Study of Digital Politeness, Humour, and Identity

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Abstract – In English-mediated digital communication, emojis play a crucial role in shaping pragmatic strategies, influencing expressions of politeness, humour, or persuasion. This study examines their functions as meaning-making tools in a two-million-word corpus from posts on the r/hikikomori subreddit, an online community of users who withdraw from social life and remain confined to their homes for long periods. Within this context, where norms differ from mainstream platforms, emojis can act as affective amplifiers, softening harsh statements or signalling empathy in discussions about isolation and mental health. Their use in self-directed humour reflects awareness of one’s condition and reinforces in-group belonging. Drawing on multimodal discourse analysis and pragmatic frameworks, and combining corpus-assisted methods with qualitative examination, we investigate the interplay between the 10 most frequent emojis and text at both macro and micro levels. Our findings show that the emojis under investigation function primarily as expressions of emotions and attitudes as well as emotional and pragmatic intensity enhancers; they are also employed as politeness markers mitigating face-threatening acts or as cues for humour and irony clarifying or subverting textual meaning. Emoji interpretation is highly context-dependent, shaped by linguistic and extralinguistic factors, and contributes to the realisation of speech acts by strengthening or softening communicative intentions. This study highlights the evolving pragmatic role of emojis as flexible, context-sensitive elements in digital discourse. It contributes to understanding multimodal communication in niche online communities and calls for further research into how emoji use varies across subcultures and platforms, shaping online identity and interaction.

Keywords: hikikomori; Reddit; emoji; online communities; cyberpragmatics.

1. Introduction¹

First introduced by psychiatrist Tamaki Saito in the late 1990s, the term “hikikomori” derives from two Japanese words: *hiku* (引), meaning “to

¹ Although the research was carried out jointly by the three authors, Silvia Cavaliere wrote Sections 3, 4, 5.1 and 5.2.1, Sara Corrizzato wrote sections 1, 5.2.3, 5.2.5, 6, and Valeria Franceschi wrote Sections 2, 5.2.2. and 5.2.4.

pull back” or “to withdraw”, and *komoru* (こもる), meaning “to seclude oneself” or “to shut oneself away”.

The term “hikikomori” was coined to refer to a prolonged, marked pattern of social withdrawal in which a person remains at home most days, avoids school or work, and restricts in-person social contact for at least six months, with associated functional impairment (Kato *et al.* 2019; Saito 1998). This behaviour was first formally categorised in Japan in the late twentieth century, but more recently the phenomenon has been observed worldwide, leading experts around the world to study its possible causes/consequences and identify new assessment tools (Rooksby *et al.* 2020).

Recent international reviews point out that hikikomori is not merely “shyness” or ordinary solitude but a sustained retreat from face-to-face participation in society. A range of factors have been implicated in the development of hikikomori, including dysfunctional parent–child relationships, intense social expectations, academic/working pressures, mental health problems, or various combinations of these components (Krieg and Dickie 2013; Neoh *et al.* 2023). Expert debate remains active regarding whether hikikomori should be classified primarily as a psychiatric disorder or as an adaptive response to socio-cultural constraints. Within this discourse, researchers frequently identify two sub-classes of individuals: *primary hikikomori*, characterized by social isolation which happens in the absence of a clearly identifiable external trigger, and *secondary hikikomori*, in which social withdrawal is understood as a secondary manifestation of an underlying condition such as a psychiatric illness, traumatic experience, or severe psychosocial problems (Suwa and Suzuki 2013; Li and Wong 2015).

Most cases still find a predominance of adolescents and young adults who report a progressive pattern in which the aforementioned parameters can be detected: initial school/academic refusal or work disengagement, inversion of sleep-wake cycles and narrowing of daily activities to the private setting.

Prolonged time spent at home is associated with increasingly intensive Internet use, e.g., gaming, streaming and social media, which often becomes the hikikomori’s central occupation (Li and Wong 2015; Tateno *et al.* 2019). Hence, compared to earlier decades, hikikomori today make far greater use of the Internet (a trend that reflects the role digitalisation has in everyday society). As online activities permeate contemporary society, it has in some days naturally become even more important for individuals who spend most of their time physically isolated. For hikikomori, the digital sphere seems to be the primary source for information, entertainment and social interaction (Krieg and Dickie 2013; Neoh *et al.* 2023; Suwa and Suzuki 2013).

Acknowledging the massive presence of this community in online spaces, recent studies have focused on hikikomori’s digital interaction with the aim to understand the role virtual communication can have in their life. The literature reveals a dual nature of online interaction: on the one hand, it

can have a restorative, even salvific power, while on the other, it has the potential to exacerbate pre-existing problematic behaviours. Kato *et al.* (2019) suggest that online platforms can serve as a compensatory social space for hikikomori, offering effortless opportunities for interacting with other people; therefore, Internet fora and social media platforms can help hikikomori get and keep in contact with other people, contributing to reducing total isolation. In a similar interpretative vein, Coppola and Masullo (2021) recognise the virtual environment, specifically Facebook, as a means for hikikomori of maintaining a form of social identity, sharing with the other members of the community their feelings, thoughts and beliefs. Results reported in Cavalieri and Corrizzato's linguistic study (2025) also explain that Reddit is seen as a virtual space in which hikikomori have the possibility to interact and describe their feelings without the pressure given by offline society.

On the other hand, other studies question the interactional validity of these exchanges. While some online communication may involve meaningful contact with other individuals, much of it occurs in mediated or semi-anonymous environments, e.g., through interactions with avatars or participation in online gaming, where interactants may never engage in direct interpersonal contact with the risk to reinforce isolation (Esposito and Addeo 2025; Fong and Yip 2023; Gavin and Brosnan 2022).

Considering both the advantages and the limitations of digital interaction, the present contribution adopts an intermediate stance: although online fora inevitably lack many of the relational characteristics of face-to-face communication, they can provide a meaningful arena in which users share and develop their ideas and engage with like-minded peers. In this regard, a linguistic analysis of the written discourse can provide a valuable tool for going beyond the surface level of the text, uncovering meanings that can shed light on the interlocutors' identities and interactional styles.

Building on this brief introduction, the present study aims to fill a gap in the literature by providing a linguistic perspective on hikikomori, an angle still understudied in favour of psychiatric and sociological approaches since Saito's pioneering studies (1998). Specifically, examining how hikikomori describe themselves, their environment, and their emotions in virtual spaces can provide useful insights into the subjective dimensions of the phenomenon.

To this objective, the next paragraph will describe the role of emoticons and emojis in contributing to the pragmatic force of utterances, whereas in section 4 the methodological framework of our study will be presented. In the next paragraphs, the quantitative and qualitative results will be included and contextualised.

2. Emoticons and emojis as pragmatic devices

Emoticons, a blend of “emotion” and “icon”, are pictorial representations of emotions using keyboard characters, such as the classic smiley face – :-). Their primary function was to allow users to indicate their emotions more accurately (e.g. Dresner and Herring 2010), particularly in light of missing contextual cues naturally present in face-to-face interactions, that is, verbal and non-verbal features such as suprasegmentals, facial expressions and gestures. Within online environments – blogs, discussion fora, social media platforms, and (mobile) instant messaging applications among others – most communication occurs in written form. The use of emoticons contributed to greater clarity and nuance in online exchanges. Indeed, Huang *et al.* 2008)’s study revealed that users perceived emoticons as a useful tool to convey additional information, making text-based interactions richer and more expressive.

As technology progressed and new affordances were introduced in internet-mediated communication environments, emoticons evolved from combinations of keyboard characters to more sophisticated small pictorial icons named emojis – from the Japanese *e* (絵), “picture,” and *moji* (文字), “character.” These comprise a much wider range of representations than emoticons, including facial expressions, people, abstract concepts, animals, plants, activities, travel (Li and Yang 2018; Rodrigues *et al.* 2017). The repertoire of emojis has gradually expanded over time: the full emoji list now contains 3953 emojis, including gender and skin variations.²

Multiple studies have explored the semantic meaning of individual emojis in isolation (e.g. Jaeger and Ares 2017); while these perception studies provide valuable insight, it is equally significant to examine how emojis are employed within authentic interactions. Their interpretation is indeed highly context-dependent: the same picture may be understood or used differently within different communities and cultures (Bettelli and Panzeri 2023; Gibson *et al.* 2018; Widlana *et al.* 2024), where the use of emojis was determined to be – to different degrees – influenced by the local culture in either meaning or context of use.

Yus (2014) stresses this point by theorizing a continuum that extends from purely arbitrary to explicitly iconic interpretations, driven by cultural norms for decoding visual signs. This continuum illustrates that understanding the meaning of an emoji often requires some form of textual “anchorage” or contextual grounding within the message. In other words, the

² <https://unicode.org/emoji/charts/full-emoji-list.htm> (19.09.2025).

meaning of an emoji is seldom fixed and instead relies heavily on the surrounding text and the social or cultural context in which it is used.

Beyond their well-established role in adding accuracy to expression of emotion, emojis also contribute to the construction of both social identity and meaning, serving a variety of pragmatic functions in communication, either alone or alongside text. Indeed, studying internet-mediated interactions without considering the visual information provided by emojis “would lead to the loss of important information that conveys people’s feelings or clarifies the meaning of the text” (Kusal *et al.* 2025, p. 13). The importance of emojis is also highlighted by research that suggests that their use may influence how readers perceive the emotionality and clarity of a message as well as sender warmth (*et al.* 2022).

Yus’s concept of Cyberpragmatics (2011) is often employed as a theoretical background to analyse how meaning is constructed in internet-mediated interactions where paralinguistic and extralinguistic cues are limited or entirely absent. Cyberpragmatics, as the name suggests, focuses on the distinct characteristics of digital exchanges, considering how text deformation,³ emoticons and emojis, and other audio-visual aspects of internet-mediated communication function pragmatically in these interactions.

Research on emoji is however not limited to linguistics and communication studies: other disciplines, such as psychology, have also looked at communication in a variety of digital environments, including blogs, social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, and instant messaging clients and apps. These studies have revealed the multifaceted roles of emoticons and emojis in internet-mediated interactions.

Emojis have been shown to be employed as politeness strategies, where they are used as face-saving devices (e.g. Togans *et al.* 2021), or to help mitigate face-threatening acts (e.g. Kavanagh 2016). Related to their role in politeness, emojis also play an important role in rapport-building, contributing to managing face, turn-taking, and as markers of informality (e.g. Sampietro 2019). In (mobile) instant-messaging, in addition to turn-taking devices, emojis may also act as a form of backchanneling (e.g. Li and Yang 2018). Expression of humour and irony has also been attested as a function of emoji (e.g. Bettelli and Panzeri 2023).

Multiple taxonomies for the pragmatic functions of emojis have been developed, from simpler, three-way classifications (e.g. Dresner and Herring 2012; Luor *et al.* 2010) to more articulated categorisations, such as Kavanaugh’s (2010), Yus’s (2014), and Li and Yang’s (2018), which builds

³ Text deformation includes different strategies such as use of capitalization, repetition of letters, or alternative uses of punctuation marks for the purpose of verbally expressing emphasis, attitude and feelings in textual internet-mediated interactions.

on Yus's taxonomy. The revision simplified function names for increased comprehensibility, combined functions with foggy borders, and added a turn-taking and backchanneling device to the list of functions. The authors applied their taxonomy to a corpus of socio-emotional communication on the Chinese instant-messaging service *WeChat*. Socio-emotional communication settings appear to show more frequent use of emojis than task-oriented exchanges; we may posit that an online community of hikikomori is a social-emotional setting, and while Reddit allows for the sharing of pictures and gifs in comments, they are not as widely used as emojis. For the purpose of this study, we will adopt a revised version of their categorisation, as will be further detailed in the next section.

3. The corpus

For the present study, the analysis was carried out on a corpus of Reddit posts, hereafter referred to as the Hikikomori Reddit Corpus. Reddit, launched in 2005 by Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian, is a social news and discussion website that has become increasingly popular over the last two decades. On this sharing platform, user-generated content is posted in interest-based communities called subreddits, signalled by the prefix *r/*. Subreddits may cover a wide variety of topics, ranging from minority groups and fan communities to online phenomena such as memes and current events (Yadav *et al.* 2021, p. 1286).

According to the most recent statistics (Q2 2025), Reddit hosts more than 100,000 active communities (subreddits) and has surpassed 1 billion cumulative posts since its launch. The platform counts approximately 110 million daily active users (DAU) and over 416 million weekly active users (WAU), marking a significant increase compared to previous years.

Reddit functions similarly to an online forum: registered users publish posts (also called *threads*) in subreddits, where they share items (text, pictures, videos, links, etc.) for other community members to comment on and discuss. Anonymity is a distinctive feature of Reddit, as users are not required to disclose personal identity or location. Each subreddit has its own guidelines, maintained by moderators to ensure respectful participation. Another defining characteristic is Reddit's voting system, whereby users can upvote or downvote posts and comments. Content with higher numbers of upvotes gains more visibility within the subreddit and the site as a whole (Michellebrous 2017).

The *Hikikomori Reddit Corpus* was compiled by collecting all posts published on the subreddit *r/hikikomori* between January 2020 and July 2023,

amounting to approximately 2 million words.⁴ The starting point in 2020 was chosen to capture discussions in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has been reported to exacerbate conditions of social withdrawal. Within this subreddit, individuals living with the hikikomori condition can find a virtual “place” to discuss their situation of psychological and social isolation.

The data was retrieved using a Python script from the PushShift archive, a service that gathers and stores Reddit submissions and comments. Two batches of data were collected: one consisting of submissions, the other of comments. Both batches underwent anonymisation: all usernames were replaced by unique identifiers composed of the prefix “id” followed by six random digits (e.g., *id679841*). The resulting datasets were stored as CSV files, with non-relevant columns dropped in order to retain only the anonymised author, the text (*selftext*), posting time (*created_utc*), and other attributes varying by post type. Posts with no textual content (*selftext*), as well as those marked as [deleted] or [removed], were excluded. The temporal metadata originally stored as Unix epoch time was reformatted to a standard *YYYY-MM-DD HH:MM:SS* UTC format. Each batch was also labelled with a *type* column (submission vs. comment), to facilitate the creation of subcorpora. The two datasets were then merged into a single file and converted into XML, a format suitable for corpus linguistic tools, where metadata annotation (e.g., author, date, type) is kept distinct from the textual fields (title and body).

As a further step, the XML corpus underwent emoji tagging in order to enable pragmatic analysis. Each emoji was automatically detected through Unicode-based regular expressions, then normalised into canonical forms (e.g., coloured hearts → HEART, stars → STAR, skin tone modifiers removed). Normalised tokens were wrapped in dedicated XML tags (e.g., `<emoji type="HEART"/>`) so that they could be queried and analysed in corpus platforms such as SketchEngine. This tagging process made it possible to retrieve emoji systematically, to treat them as searchable units parallel to words, and to connect them to their pragmatic functions according to the coding scheme adopted in this study (Li, Yang 2018; Yus 2011, 2021).

4. Methodology

Drawing on Corpus Linguistics and cyberpragmatics, the study adopted a mixed-method approach and data was investigated both from a quantitative

⁴ We would like to thank Hunter Paul Youngquist, who cooperated in compiling the Hikikomori Reddit Corpus.

and a qualitative perspective. In the first phase of the investigation, emojis were automatically parsed from the corpus using ElementTree, which is a Python XML parsing library. To extract the emojis carefully, two types of emotional expressions were considered: contextualised emojis in XML tags and Unicode emoji codes. The corpus was read in a systematic way to access all text contents, using rather flexible parsing methods in order to retain data content despite possible structural inconsistencies within the file format. All the extracted emojis were collected and then analysed with the Counter class (Python 3) to calculate frequency distribution. At the end of this extraction, we focused on the ten most frequent emojis found in our corpus and we looked at their context of use through the concordance tool of *SketchEngine* (Kilgarriff *et al.* 2014) to pinpoint the predominant pragmatic functions for the subsequent qualitative analysis.⁵

For the qualitative pragmatic analysis of emojis, we adopted a functional categorisation based on a framework that integrates Li and Yang's (2018) corpus-based taxonomy with Yus's (2011, 2021) cyberpragmatic categories. The following table provides an overview of these categories, outlining the main functions they perform in online interaction.

Li and Yang (2018)	Integrated description
Attitude / Emotion signals	Express emotions and attitudes; build empathy and solidarity.
Intensity enhancers	Reinforce emotional intensity; boost pragmatic salience of the utterance.
Humour / Irony	Orient interpretation toward irony, humour or sarcasm.
Illocutionary force modifiers	Modify or soften the illocutionary force; disambiguate speaker intention.
Turn-taking / Backchannel signals	Maintain/open the channel; signal acknowledgement or minimal agreement.
Identity markers (Yus 2011, 2021)	Emoji as markers of belonging, self-positioning or stylistic identity.

Table 1
Framework for the pragmatic functions of emojis.

In the sections that follow, the findings are reported beginning with a quantitative overview and moving on to a detailed qualitative analysis.

⁵ We would like to thank Javad Haditaghi, who helped us with the Python code for extracting and calculating the emojis in the corpus.

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Quantitative analysis: focus on the top ten emojis in the r/Hikikomori corpus

In order to provide an initial quantitative overview of emoji presence in the Hikikomori Reddit corpus, Table 2 reports the ten most frequent items together with the percentages of the pragmatic functions they are associated with:

Emoji	Frequency (% of all emojis)	Main pragmatic functions (with % of total uses)
😄	4.68	Express emotions & attitudes (49.5%); Modify/soften the illocutionary force (14.0%); Irony/humour (12.9%); Boost salience (12.9%)
😂	3.66	Irony/humour (76.8%); Build empathy & solidarity (15.9%); No clear meaning (4.5%)
🙄	3.27	Modify/soften illocutionary force (48.4%); Maintain/open the channel (19.4%); Boost salience (14.5%); Reinforce emotional intensity (9.7%)
👍	2.88	Boost salience (42.6%); Reinforce emotional intensity (24.1%); Express emotions & attitudes (17.0%); Acknowledgement/minimal agreement (11.1%)
😊	2.19	Express emotions & attitudes (46.7%); Reinforce emotional intensity (35.6%); Build empathy & solidarity (17.8%)
😏	2.19	Express emotions & attitudes (25.6%); Build empathy & solidarity (17.9%); Acknowledgement/minimal agreement (25.6%); Irony/humour (12.8%)
😭	2.15	Reinforce emotional intensity (94.4%); Irony/humour (5.6%)
😜	2.15	Irony/humour (90.6%); Build empathy & solidarity (6.3%); No clear meaning (3.1%)
🙏	2.05	Express emotions & attitudes (65.7%); Build empathy & solidarity (34.3%)
❤️	1.90	Express emotions & attitudes (40.0%); Reinforce emotional intensity (20.0%); Build empathy & solidarity (14.3%); No clear meaning (2.9%)

Table 2

Top ten emojis in the *Hikikomori* corpus: frequency and main pragmatic functions.

As is possible to observe from the table, each emoji may be associated to different pragmatic functions and sometimes one emoji can perform two functions at the same time. For the purpose of our study, however, we have decided to focus only on the primary pragmatic function enacted by each emoji, rather than on secondary or concurrent functions, that is, the function most prominently and transparently conveyed by the emoji in context. The categorisation was based on full agreement among the three researchers.

The most recurrent emoji is the Grinning Face with Sweat 😄 (4.68%), which displays a heterogeneous functional profile. As the distribution in our corpus shows, it is employed primarily to *express emotions and attitudes* (49.5%) but also contributes to *mitigating illocutionary force* (14.0%), *irony and humour* (12.9%), and *boosting salience* (12.9%).

The second most frequent emoji, 😂, Face with Tears of Joy, (3.66%), has a much more “specialised” use and it is almost exclusively used to *orient interpretation toward irony and humour* (76.8%), with additional contributions to *solidarity* (15.9%). This profile confirms its centrality in reinforcing collective sharing within humorous alignment, in line with Yus’s (2011, 2021) account of affective intensification. Similarly, 🤣, Rolling on the Floor Laughing, (2.15%) is almost exclusively humorous (90.6%), marking amusement as also a means of solidarity in the Hikikomori group.

By contrast, the Thinking Face 🤔 (3.27%) has a different orientation. It functions primarily to *modify or soften illocutionary force* (48.4%), and to *maintain the channel* (19.4%), while also slightly contributing to *salience boosting* (14.5%). This emoji is less about affect and more about guiding the interpretation of the utterance. Thumbs Up 👍 (2.88%), on the other hand, is mainly used to *boost salience* (42.6%), *reinforce intensity* (24.1%), thus it functions as a marker of digital backchannel sustaining conversational continuity.

The relational orientation is particularly evident in the Smiling Face with Smiling Eyes 😊 (2.19%) and the folded hands 🙏 (2.05%). The former is used to *express positive emotions* (46.7%), but also to *reinforce intensity* (35.6%) and *build solidarity* (17.8%). The latter is more solidarity-driven as it appears mainly in *expressive gratitude* (65.7%) and *solidarity-building* contexts (34.3%). Similarly, the Red Heart ❤️ (1.9%) is used across several categories, though it is especially salient in *express emotions* (40.0%) and *reinforce intensity* (20.0%), consolidating affective ties in supportive exchanges.

Interestingly, the Beaming Face with Smiling Eyes 😄 (2.19%) fulfills different functions: it contributes to *expressing emotions* (25.6%), it is equally used to *signal acknowledgement* (25.6%) and, to a lesser extent, to *build solidarity* (17.9%) and *mark humour* (12.8%). Finally, the Loudly Crying Face 🤧 (2.15%) is highly “specialised”, with 94.4% of its uses reinforcing *emotional intensity*, thus dramatising affective stances and personal narratives, in line with the expressive amplification highlighted in previous literature.

Macrocategory	Pragmatic Function (with representative emojis)	Percentage (%)
Attitude / Emotion signals	Express emotions & attitudes 😂 😊 😄 🙏 ❤️	24.5
	Build empathy & solidarity 🤣 😊 😄 🙏 ❤️	12.0
Intensity enhancers	Reinforce emotional intensity 😂 👍 😊 🤧 ❤️	15.9
	Boost pragmatic salience 😂 🤔 👍	10.4
Humour / Irony	Irony / humour / sarcasm 😂 🤣 😊 🤣 🤧	20.3
Illocutionary force modifiers	Modify / soften the illocutionary force 🤔 🤔	2.6

Turn-taking / Backchannel signals	Maintain / open the channel 🙄 😊	9.4
	Acknowledgement / minimal agreement 👍 😊	3.0
No clear meaning		2.0

Table 3
Distribution of pragmatic functions and associated emojis.

Overall, as shown by Table 3, which represents the general distribution of the pragmatic functions throughout the dataset, emojis in our corpus are predominantly used for expressive and affective purposes, i.e. the categories *express emotions and attitudes*, *irony and humour*, and *reinforce emotional intensity*, which account for over 60% of all occurrences. This pattern may reflect a tendency of the Hikikomori community to rely on emojis as affective/relational devices rather than propositional markers in line with what is assumed by Li and Yang (2018) and Yus (2021) on the function of emojis as markers of interpersonal cohesion. Moreover, humour- and irony-related functions (20.3%) constitute the second dominant area, aligning with Yus's (2021) notion of cyberpragmatic play, i.e. emojis help speakers frame potentially delicate experiences in self-ironic ways, softening vulnerability through shared amusement. Functions such as *boost pragmatic salience* (10.4%) and *maintain/open the channel* (9.4%) further point to the interactional scaffolding role of emojis, ensuring continuity and mutual involvement.

In contrast, categories such as *modify/soften illocutionary force* (2.6%) and *acknowledgement/minimal agreement* (3.0%) have a lower presence, signalling that politeness or mitigation play a secondary role compared to affective engagement.

The next section turns to the qualitative analysis, illustrating each pragmatic macrocategory with representative examples from the corpus.

5.2. Qualitative analysis: focus on the pragmatic functions of emojis

5.2.1. Attitude / Emotion signals

In the Hikikomori Reddit Corpus, the macro-category *attitude/emotion signal* encompasses emoji that foreground affective stance and interpersonal orientation. Within this broader category, two subtypes emerge as particularly significant in our data, i.e. *expressing emotions and attitudes* and *building empathy and solidarity*. The first subtype includes emojis such as 🙄, 😊, ❤️, 🙏, and 😊, which visually encode affective states such as gratitude,

embarrassment and affection. The second features the same emojis, but with the function of fostering solidarity and empathetic connection among users.

A closer analysis of the *expressing emotions and attitudes* subtype reveals that these emojis frequently function as affective expressions, they act as “metarepresentational level of information beyond the explicit content of the utterance” (Yus 2014, p. 7). In example (1) below, the user employs the folded-hands emoji to express gratitude by visually enacting thankfulness:

- (1) I appreciate the response 🙏 I thought i was taking small steps but idk I think the small store you were talking about sounds like a good idea and seems

Similarly, in example (2), we find another emoji with the same function; the smiling face emoji underscores friendliness and warmth, adding emotion to the gratitude message:

- (2) Thank you 😊 Boa sorte amigo

The user’s intent here is not merely to acknowledge but to establish warmth and goodwill, particularly in intercultural or multilingual exchanges.

Within *express emotions and attitudes*, 😓 recurrently indexes embarrassment and light self-deprecation. Example 3 pairs apology with a smile-with-sweat cue, visually indicating a embarrassment for what is stated before the emoji:

- (3) I’m sorry if that’s a bad thing 😓

This example highlights the dual function of emojis in both conveying and modulating emotional disclosure, enabling users to navigate a delicate balance between authentic self-expression and interpersonal self-preservation. The 😓 emoji was often used to express a self-deprecating attitude, especially in relation to the social challenges faced by hikikomori. This suggests awareness of their status and a certain degree of embarrassment on the part of certain users at their inability to function as full-fledged members of society.

These uses align with Li and Yang’s (2018) expressive category, where emojis function as intensifiers that reinforce verbal stance while shaping interpersonal dynamics. Moving to the *building empathy and solidarity* subtype, we observe that emojis contribute not only to affective expression but to relational alignment, fostering shared emotional ground. In example (4), the folded-hands emoji extends beyond gratitude to perform a gesture of solidarity in response to personal disclosure:

- (4) Hope things get better 🙏 I'm also in my 30s, also Asian, also a college drop-out

The emoji bridges the gap between the speakers signalling shared experience as a foundation for support. This logic of emotional reciprocity is further illustrated in example (5), where the smiling emoji subtly reframes an offer of friendship, making it appear caring and non-intrusive:

- (5) Same. we can be friends, I'm lonely a lot too 😊

The emoji here downgrades the seriousness of the statement, facilitating a safe environment for relational outreach. Finally, in example (6), the grinning face emoji infuses the message with a tone of encouragement:

- (6) Take care 😊 I feel you man

Together, these examples illustrate what Maíz-Arévalo and García-Gómez (2013: p. 741) describe as “relational work” in digital discourse – emojis operate as multimodal resources that mitigate social distance and create bonds of mutual understanding.

To sum up, the *attitude/emotion signal* category does not simply reflect internal emotional states; rather, it enables users to perform socially situated affect, negotiating both stance and affiliation. As Yus (2021) argues, the pragmatic potential of emojis lies not in their semantic content but in their capacity to manage interpersonal meaning. Within the *Hikikomori* subreddit in which expressions of isolation and emotional fragility are common, this dual function of expressing and co-constructing emotion becomes especially salient, supporting solidarity and empathy within its members.

5.2.2. Intensity enhancers

The emojis under investigation were also commonly used as intensity enhancers, reinforcing either the emotional intensity or the pragmatic salience of the proposition. In these contexts, the user's proposition is expressed verbally, and the emoji is added to further reinforce or intensify the propositional or affective attitude of the speech act (Yus 2014, p. 520, cf. also Li, Yang 2018; Sampietro 2019). Out of the 10 emoji, 8 were used to fulfill this function in our data, for a total of 132 instances.

In example (7) below, the user employs the Grinning Face with Sweat emoji in combination with the angel emoji.

- (7) Sorry for my inactivity again, but plz know if you guys need anything don't be afraid to reach out. 😇😓

The 🙄 emoji here seems to upgrade the pragmatic salience of the apology for not being active on the subreddit, also expressing awkwardness at their lack of presence. The Smiling Face with Halo emoji, not under investigation in this study, appears to play a dual function here, acting as an intensifier of their offer to help, and possibly as an irony marker, in contrast with his undesirable behavior, further highlighting the apology in the proposition.

In the following example, the Thinking Face emoji also boosts the pragmatic salience of the proposition, reinforcing both the contemplation of the statement they are responding to and the skepticism of the ensuing question.

- (8) Wait 🤔 If your dad kicked you out and you spend your money on traveling, then how do you support yourself now?

The Thinking Face may also express doubt and skepticism, and its use here introduces the verbally-coded proposition that threatens the other user's face by questioning the truth of their claims.

In example (9) below, the Smiling Face with Smiling Eyes emoji 😊 is used to both enhance the thanking speech act and the affective attitude of the author, representing gratitude and warmth.

- (9) NF for example I am so happy to hear that you managed to find a job! What you are doing here trying to help us hiki is awesome ✨😊

The presence of the Sparkles emoji alongside 😊 further amplifies the affective attitude of the message. This emoji not only contributes to expressing gratitude but also expresses excitement and a sense of celebration regarding the addressee's newfound job.

These examples show that often emojis do not fulfil a single, clear-cut function in messages, but they may provide additional visual cues to verbal propositions, adding detailed nuance to online interactions.

5.2.3. Humour / Irony

In the framework of cyberpragmatics, laughter-related emoji such as 😂 and 🤣 play a crucial role as paralinguistic cues which both frame and reinforce humorous intent in digital interaction (Dynel 2016; Yus 2021). Online discourse, indeed, lacks the prosodic and kinesthetic signals which are traditionally part of face-to-face communicative exchanges. Hence, laughter-related emojis, 😂 (occurring 53 times in this function) and 🤣 (29 times), serve to indicate that the message should be read with a humorous undertone. In this way, they guide community members to interpret the utterance non-literally, as the speaker intentionally flouts conversational maxims to signal a

non-bona-fide mode of communication (Raskin 1985).

Our corpus reflects this tendency, as the two emoji are included when the interlocutors want to reinforce the cooperative alignment among the members of the community, building or maintaining rapport in digital forum. In the following example, the author of the message reports on their renewed inclination to drive and provides a humorous account of the reactions of their neighbours upon seeing them behind the wheel.

- (10) The young kids in the neighbourhood were watching me in the car driving and talking about me, 🤔. Some of them probably wasn't even born when I first started driving, so this is their first time seeing me do adult things.

Ideally, 😂 and 🤔 also illustrate the gradient of intensity in affective stance: 😂 often functions as a marker of recognition or affiliative laughter, whereas 🤔 indexes heightened amusement or exaggerated hilarity (Provine 2000; Danesi 2017). In this sense, our data do not align with these theories, as the two emoji coexist and do not appear to be selected according to the level of amusement.

Consistent with prior studies, our research demonstrates, however, that the two emojis are also employed when interlocutors intend to convey irony, marking it through their use. In the context of the hikikomori community, irony thus emerges as a self-reflexive device through which individuals narrate their experiences and behaviours in a mocking manner, positioning themselves at once inside and at a distance from their own stories. In the following posts, irony arises from the incongruity between normative expectations and the two hikikomori's lived realities. In the first, the suggestion to travel abroad contrasts humorously with the individual's difficulty in leaving their room, while in the second, temporary online interactions are ironically framed as equivalent to friendships.

- (11) A person recommended I travel to Japan, and I laughed in abysmal despair. Like I'm afraid to attend college, let alone leave my own room. I can dream, tho! 😂
- (12) Welcome to the club 🤔 People actually make friends here? yep. sometimes it lasts 6hrs, usually 12hrs and if i'm lucky i get a whole day 😂 having relationships with fictional characters is pretty normal.

Within the corpus, additional emojis are employed to mark humorous utterances, although with considerably lower frequency; notably, 😂 occurs only 12 times in this function. In the following post, for instance, the inclusion of 😂 functions as a pragmatic cue, mitigating the potentially face-threatening force of the expression and framing it instead as playful self-irony. In this way, the utterance both acknowledges a stigmatized desire

within the hikikomori community and reinterprets it through humorous stance-taking, guiding recipients toward a non-literal meaning.

(13) Yeah, no shit I think all of us wish to be normal, lol 😅

5.2.4. Illocutionary force modifiers

Emoticon and emoji use has been linked to enhancing or softening the illocutionary force of the speech act they are attached to, expressing user intentions in a more accurate manner and clarifying the meaning of their words (Yus 2014). Prior research has shown (e.g., Sampietro 2018; Kavanagh 2016; Yus 2014; Dresner, Herring 2010) that emoticons and emojis are employed to downgrade or mitigate the impact of directive speech acts that may otherwise be perceived as face-threatening by readers. This strategy was however not frequently associated to the emojis under investigation in our corpus: only 13 instances were identified, all of which involved the Grinning Face with Sweat Emoji (😅). This emoji is often defined as expressing embarrassment or awkwardness, relief after a stressful situation, or again, management of a stressful situation, as may be seen in the examples below.⁶ It may also be used to express self-criticism or self-deprecation, as was seen in section (5.2.1).⁷

(14) Lol Doom scrolling social media. That sounds absolutely horrid 😅
Perhaps play Minecraft?

In this context, the author of the comment is reacting to another user's complaints about their online gaming experience, which they compare to 'doom scrolling' on social media. The use of the emoji here mitigates the strength of the adjective 'horrid', signalling the light, almost humorous tone of the comment, while at the same time expressing awkwardness at the other user's negative experience.

In the following example, the emoji is used to soften the face-threat of a statement rather than a directive, and to mark the proposition as a stressful situation that many people, not just hikikomori, have to deal with:

(15) Maybe not hikis specifically, but I guarantee there's a bunch of lonelyass introverted people sitting in their rooms alone feeling the same way 😅 So many people are alone and want love & friendship

⁶ <https://emojiterria.com/smiling-face-with-open-mouth-cold-sweat/>; <https://englishonline.britishcouncil.org/blog/articles/beyond-a-smiling-face-your-guide-to-uncommon-emoji-meanings/> (27.09.2025).

⁷ <https://emojiagraph.org/grinning-face-with-sweat/> (27.09.2025).

Here the author replies to another user complaining that they may not meet any other hikis in their town to bond with. He corrects their assumption pointing out that loneliness is a common condition and they are likely to find someone looking for human contact. The emoji here, as stated above, appears to play a dual purpose: on the one hand, it mitigates the face-threat of the disagreement expressed in the message; on the other, it highlights loneliness as stressful condition that is shared by many in contemporary society.

While other, less frequent emojis may have been used in the subreddit to modify or soften the illocutionary force of speech acts, it appears that this function is not as common here. Verbal downgraders and mitigators may be preferred or, as an informal support community, directive speech acts such as exhortations may not be mitigated. Further research would help clarify the role of directives in such communities.

5.2.5. *Turn-taking / Backchannel signals*

Within our corpus, the following emojis 😊 (14 occurrences), 🤔 (12 occurrences) and 👍 (6 occurrences) also function as backchanneling devices, serving to maintain or initiate the communicative channel and to signal acknowledgement or minimal alignment, as the following examples show:

(16) Thats like our holy national dish , u can buy those dishes almonst everywhere. That guy sucks as a t guide, if he failed to even mention about momo. U taste nepal when u eat it 😊 and ull come back for more Im sure ull go to bhutan one day, plz try momo there.

(17) I think you've got it backwards: if you were literal trash, someone else would have to throw you away. So, rejoice in your capability.
 ✨😂👍✨

In the first post the emoji 😊 does not introduce new propositional content but reinforces the speaker's enthusiastic stance, thereby sustaining the positive tone of the exchange, confirming signal acknowledgement. Similarly, the 👍 emoji in the second post, together with the other ones, functions primarily as a phatic marker, signalling acknowledgement too. In both cases, the emojis operate as pragmatic resources that guide interpretation and contribute to enhancing cooperation among the interactants.

6. Concluding remarks

This study has explored the pragmatic functions of emojis in the r/hikikomori subreddit, a digital space where individuals experiencing extreme social withdrawal communicate and construct shared meaning. By integrating corpus linguistics with a cyberpragmatics framework, the research has illustrated how emojis serve not merely decorative purposes but perform pragmatic functions related to the expression and modulation of emotion, identity, and interpersonal stance and community dynamics. These results are in line with Li and Yang's 2018 study, which highlighted how emojis are primarily socio-emotional tools.

The quantitative analysis revealed that a core group of ten emojis dominates interaction within the community, with each emoji demonstrating a range of pragmatic functions. Notably, emojis such as 😭, 😂, and 🙄 perform multifunctional roles, i.e. conveying embarrassment, signalling humour or softening illocutionary force. This could mirror the nuanced affective landscape of hikikomori discourse due to the varied community of the sub-reddit.

From a qualitative perspective, the analysis of emoji use also reveals that hikikomori's inclusion of emoji serves as an important resource, fostering cooperation and developing a sense of collective belonging within the digital community. Although the members do not know each other personally, emojis help them to share their experiences and emotional states and to express affective alignment, reinforcing group cohesion in computer-mediated communication. Predictably, the turn-taking and backchannelling functions were rare, as Reddit is an asynchronous platform, where many people interact by starting different threads in response to user posts. It is a different context from instant messaging where minimal agreements and backchannel devices would be more common (Li, Yang 2018).

While the present analysis focused on the most frequently used emojis, this perspective inevitably limited the exploration of more creative uses, including their (potential) role as identity markers and the emergence of alternative, community-based meanings. This methodological choice was due to the large size of the corpus, which made a more fine-grained analysis difficult to manage. Future research could therefore benefit from adopting a more qualitative approach on a smaller sample of the corpus, allowing experts to investigate how emojis function as resources for identity construction in such a community.

Moreover, future research could explore text-based emoticons, which were excluded from the present analysis due to challenges in parsing complex character combinations, as well as examine hikikomori individuals' use of emojis across other online platforms. Such analysis could offer comparative insights into whether and how different online fora can shape patterns of

emoji use.

In conclusion, the findings of this study suggest that emojis should not be understood merely as tools for expressing emotion but rather as elements of a broader communicative repertoire. Within this context, emojis appear to function as a form of language, contributing to the construction of politeness strategies, interpersonal cohesion, and group identity. By examining emoji use, this analysis highlights how this visual code actively participates in shared norms and meaning-making practices, offering insight into the social and pragmatic dimensions of digital communication.

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