

Exploring Emoji Functions in Comments on Game Trailers with Different Target Audiences

Christopher Yeung

English Department, Faculty of Humanities and Creative Industries, Petra Christian University,
Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236, INDONESIA
E-mail: chrisyeung2003@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study explores the emoji functions in Instagram comments on two game trailers targeting different age groups using Yus' (2014) eight-function taxonomy. This study analyzes Instagram comments on two game trailers that are aimed at different age groups, not comments written by confirmed adults or children. A qualitative approach was employed, with data containing 70 Elden Ring and 79 Toca Boca World comments. Key findings show that the Elden Ring comments used all eight emoji functions while the Toca Boca World comments used only six of them. The study also found single emojis performing two roles simultaneously and decorative emojis that do not fit into Yus' (2014) taxonomy. This research shows how commenters use emojis differently (or similarly) when reacting to content for distinct age groups. Future studies could analyse emoji functions on other online platforms, compare more game trailers, or examine differences across gender or cultural background.

Keywords: adults, children, emoji functions, game trailers, Instagram comments

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital era, emojis play an important role in how people express feelings, attitudes, or intentions in digital communications. Researchers have moved beyond classifying emoji types and now focus on the different functions that emojis perform. Thus, it is crucial to have a better understanding on how people use emoji functions in digital communications.

This study uses Yus' (2014) eight-functions taxonomy to analyze the emojis in comments on the Elden Ring and Toca Boca World trailers. By looking at the emoji functions, this study aims to show how commenters use emojis differently (or similarly) when reacting to content for distinct age groups. It is important to note that this study does not aim to confirm the actual age of the commenters. Therefore, this study does not analyze emoji use by adults and children, but rather emoji use in comments on content made for different age groups.

METHOD

For this study, the source of the data was the comments from the Elden Ring trailer and Toca Boca World trailer on Instagram. The data analyzed were the emojis used in those comments. These two trailers were specifically chosen because both had emoji-rich comments that made them suitable to be analyzed. The two trailers were also chosen because of their recent and close posting dates, the former posted on February 12, 2025 and the latter posted on February 19, 2025.

The data was collected on March 3, 2025 after both trailers had already garnered quite a lot of comments and were no longer receiving new comments containing emoji. Out of all 865 Elden Ring comments and 452 Toca Boca World comments, the writer found 70 and 79 direct comments that contain emoji.

To collect the data, the writer searched the comment sections of each trailer for comments that contained emoji. Next, the writer made sure that the selected comments were not replies to other comments. Then, screenshots were taken of the comments that met these two criteria, including the username, the comment text, the emojis, and the time since the comment was posted (as of March 3, 2025).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Comments on the Elden Ring trailer show all eight emoji functions. In contrast, comments on the Toca Boca World trailer show six functions. (D) Humor and (E) Irony were not found in the Toca Boca World comments. Each function is discussed below.

Attitude Signal

The writer found a number of emojis that function as attitude signals in the Elden Ring and Toca Boca World comments. Below is an example from each:

Data E. 39: “It’s about time we got a release date for this game!! 😎👍 now we just need release date for Gears of War E-Day”

Without the emojis, the sentence “It’s about time we got a release date for this game!!” can actually be taken positively and negatively. It can mean that the release date for the game has not been announced for a long time before and the commenter had grown tired of waiting. According to Emojipedia.com, the 😎 emoji is called the smiling face with sunglasses emoji. It can express that something is good or excellent, while the thumbs up emoji (👍) indicates approval. The 😎 and 👍 emojis make it clear that the comment is supposed to be taken positively, showing the commenter’s excitement and happiness on finally knowing the game’s release date.

Data T.27: “WOWWWWWWW 🐱😍”

Without the emojis, the word “wow” can actually be said with either a positive or negative attitude. The word can be said sarcastically to indicate that the person is actually unimpressed. According to Emojipedia.com, the smiling cat with heart eyes emoji (🐱) can be used to show love, infatuation, and adoration and the drooling face emoji (😍) can indicate desire for a person or an object. The 🐱 and 😍 emojis help show that the commenter is saying “wow” in a loving or adoring way, helping readers interpret the word “wow” as admiration or love.

Attitude Intensity Enhancer

The writer found a number of emojis that function as attitude intensity enhancers in the Elden Ring and Toca Boca World comments. Below is an example from each:

Yeung: Exploring Emoji Functions in Comments on
Game Trailers with Different Target Audiences

Data E.22: “RISE TARNISHED 🔥🔥🔥”

In this context, the word “TARNISHED” is the faction or group that the player character belongs to (“Tarnished,” 2025). The comment “RISE TARNISHED” is referencing a common phrase from Elden Ring. The phrase is usually used to tell or encourage the player character to rise up and fight. In this comment, the commenter is saying the phrase in excitement in reference to the game to show that he is excited to rise up and play the game. According to Dictionary.com, the fire emoji (🔥) is used to express that something is cool, awesome, exciting, or on fire. In this case, the 🔥 emojis make it look like the commenter is on fire from excitement, making the tone of the comment even more excited than it already is.

Data T.73: “Amazing I can’t describe this creativity I’m really excited 🔥🔥🔥🔥🔥🔥”

The comment explicitly shows that it is praising the trailer for its creativity. On top of that, the commenter explicitly said that they are excited for the game. According to Emojipedia.com, the fire emoji (🔥) is used to express that something is cool, awesome, or exciting. The 🔥 emojis enhance the existing positive attitude of the comment. They intensify the already positive tone by showing that the trailer is not just good, but extremely exciting and impressive, in addition to the explicitly shown praise and excitement.

Illocutionary Force Modifier

The writer found a number of emojis that function as illocutionary force modifiers in the Elden Ring and Toca Boca World comments. Below is an example from each:

Data E.2: “Just give us sekiro 2 please 🙏”

Sekiro is another video game made by FromSoftware, the same developer that made Elden Ring. This comment is asking the developer to release a sequel to Sekiro instead of Elden Ring. This may come off as rude because the comment is on an Elden Ring trailer post, making it seem like the commenter does not care about or is belittling Elden Ring. According to Emojipedia.com, the folded hands emoji (🙏) can mean thank you or please. The 🙏 emoji softens the tone of the request, making it sound more polite and less forceful. Therefore, it modifies the illocutionary force of the comment.

Data T.79: “Wow, that’s cool!!!! I loved it! note toca life ❤️”

The comment is showing their praise and love towards the trailer, but at the end of it, it says “note toca life”. According to Piknik (2024), Toca Boca World is a game that combines Toca Life standalone apps, such as Toca Life: Hospital, Toca Life: Pets, and more. That means this comment is saying “note toca life” to the standalone apps, like Toca Life: Hospital and Toca Life: Pets, that they should look at what Toca Boca World is doing and take a lesson from it. According to Emojipedia.com, the red heart emoji (❤️) can be used to express love or non-romantic positive sentiments. The ❤️ emoji alters the illocutionary force of the comment. The comment “note toca life” may sound rude or harsh towards Toca Life, but the ❤️ emoji helps show that the commenter is saying it with a positive and supportive attitude. The comment is not meant to criticize or insult, but to encourage or advise in a friendly way.

Humor

The writer found a number of emojis that function as humor in the Elden Ring comments. Below is an example:

Data E.10: “YEEEEES ! Good bye social life 😄”

The word “YEEEEES!” followed by the sentence “Good bye social life” can be misleading. It may be misinterpreted as the commenter being happy that their social life is gone. According to emojiopedia.com, the face with tears of joy emoji (😄) can be used to show that something is funny or pleasing. The 😄 emoji helps show that the comment is meant to be taken as a joke. The comment is not saying the commenter is happy about losing their social life. Instead, the commenter is expressing excitement for the game’s release and joking that if they will play it so much, their social life will be gone.

The writer did not find any emojis that function as humor in the Toca Boca World comments.

Irony

The writer found a number of emojis that function as irony in the Elden Ring comments. Below is an example:

Data E.19: “Exactly the start of my semester 2 of my final year at uni. Perfect timing 🙄🔥”

According to Elden Ring (2025), the game is set to release on May 30, 2025, which seems to coincide with the start of the commenter’s last semester in university, where he/she would be busy. Although the comment says “Perfect timing”, it is clear that the commenter is being sarcastic. According to Emojiopedia, the OK hand emoji (🙄) can mean I’m okay or good and the fire emoji (🔥) can mean excellent. The 🙄 and 🔥 emojis enhance the irony by pretending to agree that the timing is perfect, when the commenter is actually complaining about how bad the timing is.

The writer did not find any emojis that function as irony in the Toca Boca World comments.

Emotion Signal

The writer found a number of emojis that function as emotion signals in the Elden Ring and Toca Boca World comments. Below is an example from each:

Data E.32: “Not the sekuro parry mechanic?!?!? 😱😱”

According to Deflection (2023), parry is a major part of Sekiro, which is a very rewarding move to do. This parry mechanic seems to also be in Elden Ring as shown by the trailer. According to Emojiopedia.com, the face with open mouth emoji (😱) is used to convey awe or disbelief. The 😱 emojis help show that the commenter is surprised and amazed. The commenter probably did not expect that Elden Ring would have the same parry mechanic as Sekiro and was surprised that it was shown in the Elden Ring trailer.

Yeung: Exploring Emoji Functions in Comments on
Game Trailers with Different Target Audiences

Data T.7: “OMG I CANT WAIT TO TRY THE UPDATE!! 🥰🥰”

In this comment, the commenter is saying that they are excited to try the update. According to Emojipedia.com, the smiling face with heart eyes emoji (🥰) can be used to express enthusiastic feelings of love, adoration, or infatuation. The 🥰 emojis help show the commenter’s emotion more clearly. Without the 🥰 emojis, the comment only shows that the commenter is excited to try the update, but with the 🥰 emojis, it also shows that the commenter loves and adores the update.

Parallel Emotion Signal

The writer found a number of emojis that function as parallel emotion signals in the Elden Ring and Toca Boca World comments. Below is an example from each:

Data E.40: “Will the new armor sets/skins/hair also be available in the main game when we order nightreign? 😬👉👉”

The commenter is asking whether the new armor sets/skins/hair that are in Elden Ring Nightreign will also be available in the main game if they purchase it. By itself, the comment just sounds like a normal question. According to Emojipedi.com, the pleading face emoji (😬) used in sequence with the pointing hands emojis (👉👉) is often used to show shyness or hesitation. The 😬 and 👉👉 emojis help show that the commenter felt shy, not about the content of the question, but about the act of commenting itself. Moreover, because the 😬 emoji is also used to express pleading, it adds a sense of gentle request or hope, not just a question.

Data T.9: “Is there any way to turn it off 😞”

The comment is asking whether there is a way to turn off the feature shown in the trailer. According to Emojipedia.com, the crying face emoji (😞) can be used to convey sadness. The 😞 emoji shows that the commenter felt disappointed or upset while writing the comment. The sadness does not come from the question itself, but rather from the commenter’s dislike of the feature being discussed.

Emotion Intensity Enhancer

The writer found a number of emojis that function as emotion intensity enhancers in the Elden Ring and Toca Boca World comments. Below is an example from each:

Data E.8: “My love ❤️”

The commenter is expressing their love towards the game by claiming that the game is their love. According to Emojipedia.com, the red heart emoji (❤️) can be used to express love. The ❤️ emoji enhances the commenter’s love. In addition to the love that is shown in the sentence, the commenter expresses that love again using the emoji, intensifying that emotion.

Data T.30: “I Love this updatteeee ❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️ im looking forward to you Next Update ❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️ I LOVE YOU ❤️❤️”

The comment explicitly shows that the commenter loves the update. According to Emojipedia.com, the red heart emoji (❤️) can be used to show love. In this comment, the ❤️

emojis intensify the love already expressed in the sentences. The repeated use of ❤️ strengthens the emotional impact and shows that the commenter feels extremely enthusiastic and affectionate about the update.

Emojis Performing Multiple Functions

In addition to the emojis that act as one of Yus' (2014) eight emoji functions above, the writer also found that an emoji can also be used to act as two functions at the same time.

Emojis that serve two functions at once appeared in the Elden Ring comments. One major finding shows that (D) Humor often appeared together with other functions namely (A) Attitude signal, (B) Attitude-intensity enhancer, (C) Illocutionary-force modifier, and (G) Parallel emotion signal. This shows that humor is not just used to make jokes, but also to show feelings, express opinions, or make the message sound less rude.

One possible reason for the presence of this combination is because humor is an integral part of the gaming culture. Although the comments in this study were posted under an Elden Ring trailer on Instagram and the commenters' identities are unknown, they were more likely made by fans familiar with the game. Research shows that competitive and anonymous spaces, such as gaming communities, often encourage humorous behaviors like teasing, sarcasm, or playful criticism (Kowert et al., 2024). Navarro-Carrillo et al. (2021) explain that some gamers use humor playfully, while others use it in a more mocking way. This kind of communication may also appear in trailer comments. In this context, humor helps commenters soften messages that might sound rude (Cameron et al., 2013), make criticism sound funny rather than harsh (Khasawneh, 2021), and reduce misunderstandings by signaling that the comment is meant as a joke (Carneiro, 2024).

Emojis that serve two functions at once also appeared in the Toca Boca World comments. One group of combinations involved showing both an attitude and an emotion, such as (A) Attitude signal + (F) Emotion signal and (A) Attitude signal + (G) Parallel emotion signal. For example, in “Omg animation 💖😍” (T.34), the emojis made it clear that “omg” was meant positively. Similarly, in “No way ❤️❤️❤️” (T.71), the hearts showed both joyful surprise and strong approval. These examples reflect what Zhou et al. (2017) found, i.e. emojis often serve more than one purpose at the same time, helping users show their emotions while also making their reaction clearer or stronger.

Other combinations focused on strengthening the message, such as (B) Attitude intensity enhancer + (F) Emotion signal and (B) Attitude intensity enhancer + (G) Parallel emotion signal. For instance, in “Tocaaaa I don't like this 😭” (T.13), the crying emoji shows both how sad the commenter is and how strong their disapproval is. This shows that even when words express an opinion, emojis can intensify the feeling behind them. This aligns with findings by Pavalanathan and Eisenstein (2016), who explain that emojis often act as emotional amplifiers, helping users show how strongly they feel.

Finally, some combinations show how emojis were used to soften the tone of the message while still showing emotion or intensity. This includes (C) Illocutionary force modifier + (F) Emotion signal, (C) Illocutionary force modifier + (G) Parallel emotion signal, and (C) Illocutionary force modifier + (H) Emotion intensity enhancer. For example, in “That'll be great... I really miss being able to design my houses... 😞” (T.23), the sad face emoji helps the comment sound like a soft complaint rather than criticism. In “We need a record store!!!! I need vinyl ❤️” (T.52), the heart emoji reduces the demanding tone and shows love or excitement.

Herring and Dainas (2017) also found that emojis often serve this dual role. They help with adjusting tone while expressing emotion especially in informal or social media settings.

Emoji Functions That Do Not Fit Yus' (2014) Functional Categories

In some Toca Boca World comments, emojis like ✨ and 🌸 appear to be used mainly for decoration or visual style, rather than to express a specific feeling, opinion, or tone. These emojis do not carry clear communicative meaning but seem to make the comment look more cheerful, playful, or attractive. These decorative uses are not part of Yus' (2014) taxonomy, which focuses on pragmatic or communicative functions like showing emotion or modifying tone.

Interestingly, this kind of decorative emoji use was not found in the Elden Ring trailer comments. One possible reason is the difference in audience and tone between the two games. Toca Boca World is designed for younger children who may use emojis more playfully or creatively to make their comment look nice. Elden Ring, on the other hand, is a dark, mature action game for adults. Most Elden Ring comments focused on giving opinions, sharing jokes, or reacting emotionally in ways that matched the serious or intense tone of the trailer. Because of this, the emojis in Elden Ring were mainly used with clear communicative functions.

This difference supports earlier research. Koch et al. (2022) found that children tend to use more facial or decorative emojis, while adults prefer action or object-based emojis that serve clearer purposes. Similarly, Memon and Ansari (2021) found that adults often use emojis for subtle or layered meanings, while children use them to show feelings directly or to make their messages look more fun.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the emoji functions in Instagram comments on two game trailers with different target audiences, adults and children, using Yus' (2014) eight-function taxonomy. A total of 149 comments were analyzed: 70 comments from the Elden Ring trailer and 79 comments from the Toca Boca World trailer. The comments that were selected all respond directly to the trailers and contain emojis.

In the Elden Ring comments, all eight emoji functions were used. By contrast, only six functions were used in the Toca Boca World comments, namely (A) Attitude signal, (B) Attitude intensity enhancer, (C) Illocutionary force modifier, (F) Emotion signal, (G) Parallel emotion signal, and (H) Emotion intensity enhancer. No emojis were found using (D) Humor and (E) Irony. This finding suggests that the Elden Ring commenters are more likely adults who are more experienced and comfortable in using sarcasm to make comments with layered meanings, while the Toca Boca World commenters are more likely children who tend to rely on literal meaning and have less use or understanding of humor and irony.

Despite these differences, commenters from both trailers showed a similar pattern in using emoji as (A) Attitude signal, (B) Attitude intensity enhancer, (C) Illocutionary force modifier, (F) Emotion signal, (G) Parallel emotion signal, and (H) Emotion intensity enhancer. This suggests that regardless of the age group, commenters naturally use emoji to express or intensify their excitement or emotions and use emoji to clarify their intentions or be more polite.

It was also found that it is possible for an emoji to perform dual functions at the same time. These dual-function emojis were found in comments from both trailers but with different patterns of combinations. Two emojis, ✨ and 🌸, were used mainly for decoration or visual effect, so they did not match any of Yus' (2014) emoji functions.

These findings suggest that emoji use continues to evolve. Future researchers can explore emoji functions on other online platforms such as YouTube or Twitter, where different types of emojis may appear. Studies might also compare more than two games or trailers, or focus on differences across gender or cultural backgrounds. Further research could also explore whether decorative emoji should be considered as a part of expanded or new categories of emoji functions.

REFERENCES

- Cameron, E. L., Hedman, L., Didkowsky, N., Tapanya, S., & Cameron, A. (2013). "If everyone copies me, Thailand will be so much better off": The power of verbal irony in youth conversation. *International Journal of Child Youth and Family Studies*, 4(2), 189. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18357/ijcyfs42201312207>
- Carneiro, M. M. (2024). Buy my emoji: An analysis of ads in Twitter/X. *Linguagem em (Dis)curso*, 24(6). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1982-4017-24-14>
- Deflection. (2023, September 28). In Sekiro Shadows Die Twice Wiki. <https://sekiroshadowsdietwice.wiki.fextralife.com/Deflection>
- Elden Ring [@eldenring]. (2025, February 12). Remain steadfast against the encroaching rain, nightfarers. The nightlord awaits your arrival. Make your landfall in Limveld on May 30th [Video]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DF-bComBVAZ/?igsh=eJ5OXVqOTI2NGNk>
- Herring, S., & Dainas, A. (2017). "Nice picture comment!" Graphicons in Facebook comment threads. *Proceedings of the Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, 2185-2194. <https://doi.org/10.24251/hicss.2017.264>
- Khasawneh, F. A. (2021). An analysis of mitigating devices of request used by Saudi EFL learners. *International Journal of English Language Studies*, 3(11), 57–64. <https://doi.org/10.32996/ijels.2021.3.11.7>
- Koch, T. K., Romero, P., & Stachl, C. (2022). Age and gender in language, emoji, and emoticon usage in instant messages. *Journal of Computers in Human Behaviour*, 126, Article 106990. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2021.106990>
- Kowert, R., Kilmer, E., & Newhouse, A. (2024). Taking it to the extreme: Prevalence and nature of extremist sentiment in games. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1410620>
- Memon, M., & Ansari, S. (2021). Investigating different age groups' preferences and purposes of emoji use. *Sukkur IBA Journal of Educational Sciences and Technologies*, 1(2), 15-24. <https://doi.org/10.30537/SJEST.V1I2.1031>
- Navarro-Carrillo, G., Torres-Marín, J., & Carretero-Dios, H. (2021). Do trolls just want to have fun? Assessing the role of humor-related traits in online trolling behavior. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 114, 106551. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106551>
- Pavalanathan, U., & Eisenstein, J. (2016). More emojis, less :) The competition for paralinguistic function in microblog writing. *First Monday*, 21(11). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v21i11.6879>
- Piknik. (2024, July 10). What's the difference between Toca Boca Jr and Toca Boca World?. *Sagomini.com*. <https://help.sagomini.com/article/317-what-s-the-difference-between-toca-boca-jr-and-t>

Yeung: Exploring Emoji Functions in Comments on
Game Trailers with Different Target Audiences

oca-life-world

- Tarnished. (2025, April 17). In Elden Ring Wiki. <https://eldenring.fandom.com/wiki/Tarnished>
- Yus, F. (2014). Not all emoticons are created equal. *Linguagem Em (Dis)Curso*, 14(3), 511–529. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-4017-140304-0414>
- Zhou, R., Hentschel, J., & Kumar, N. (2017). Goodbye text, hello emoji. *Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 748–759. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3025453.3025800>