



The Analysis of Emoji as Social Identity Markers as Found in NCT KPOP Fan Twitter Usernames

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.25077/lingolitera.v2.i2.2026.41-47>
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SUBMISSION TRACK

Submission : March 9, 2026
Final Review : April 20, 2026
Accepted : May 16, 2026
Available online : May 30, 2026

KEYWORDS

Emoji, Usernames, Social Identity, Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA), Indexicality, Kpop, NCT.

ABSTRACT

This research aims to analyze how emojis are used in digital communication, particularly in usernames, to represent social identity within the Kpop Idol, NCT Dream fandom (NCTzens). The study focused on usernames found in the comment section of the official NCT Dream Twitter account during the fans meeting <Dream Quest> with NCTzens Day 1 on May 24, 2025, at 10:00 PM. The study applied Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) by Susan C. Herring (2004) as the main theoretical framework, supported by Social Identity by Tajfel and Turner (1979) and the Indexicality Theory by Buncholtz and Hall (2005) which analysis examines how emojis relate to identity. The data consisted of 88 usernames containing emojis, which were analyzed to identify which emojis functioned as social identity markers and which served just as decorative elements. The findings reveal that emojis in usernames have dual functions, first they as a social identity marker, indexing fandom identity, symbolic attachment to NCT Dream and associations with specific members, and second is as decorative elements, used for aesthetic enhancement without identify significance. The study identifies 10 types of emojis in usernames account distributed across animal, nature, and activity. In conclusion, this study shows that the use of emojis in usernames within the NCT Dream fan community reflects both sociolinguistic identity construction and aesthetic expression. Emojis therefore play a significant role as linguistic features in computer-mediated communication, shaping how online fan communities display belonging, identity, and symbolic meaning.

INTRODUCTION

Emoji are pictorial symbols have become an important part of digital communication. At first, emojis were used only to convey linguistic aspect that were used to express feelings or ideas in the abstract. However, they have now become a universal form of communication and people used emojis in writing to show emotions and nonverbal meanings in digital conversations. As stated by Arafah and Hasyim (2019), the phenomenon of emoji use on social media is not limited to functioning as a visual language to convey emotions and thoughts, but also as an integral part of text structure. Nowadays, emojis are increasingly employed in global communication exchanges and have evolved into a language of their own. In the digital era, the use of emojis represents a significant transformation in communication, particularly in areas such as non-verbal communication studies, cultural studies, and the representation of symbolic meaning.

On social media, especially Twitter or X stands out as a unique space where users can express themselves through a combination of text and media, especially the use of emoji symbols in usernames on Twitter. In the context of social media, a username serves as a symbolic representation of identity, distinguishing one user from another. Currently, many users often create their social media usernames using a combination of, letters, numbers, symbolic, and usually add emojis to their usernames to express personal interest, group affiliation, emotions or social identity. The communication technology including the Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) changes along with the process of human contact. The digital technology has extended from having face- to-face interaction. Emoji are a feature that exists in digital discourse and has become a feature that is used in online interactions. The choice of certain emojis by users reflects personal preferences, as well as indexical meanings related to aspects such as social identity, culture, skin color, gender and other identity markers (Marko, 2023).

This study highlights the meaning of what emoji symbols are used and what is shown to the viewer. In this case social media is used to build identity and social relationships, particularly in the context of K-pop fandom namely is NCT Dream. K-pop fandoms are one of the most active communities on social media. Among them, NCT and its sub-units, including NCT Dream, maintain a massive global fanbase known as NCTzens. Fans frequently employ creative strategies to display their group loyalty and shared identity. The community often add emojis to their social media usernames, especially on Twitter (X). For instance, NCT Dream fans often include emojis to their social media usernames such as the emoji green heart  for example usernames *@@Nomin  *. In general, the green heart emoji is one of the symbols used to express love. In the context of NCT fans, the emoji represent about the feeling of NCTzens giving their full support and love to the fandom NCT fans community. The use of these emojis is not just a decoration, but rather a way to express what their identity and affiliation to their favored groups.

The social identity of the fans believing their membership in fandom can be summarized as characteristics of fandom members. The communication and interaction between fans are based on the formation of a common understanding of language symbols. Since the user of language is human, language and identity are always in mutual influence and constraint relationship, and the reason why fans gather in the community is to obtain social identity (Zhang & Dong, 2023).

METHOD

This research using the theory of social identity and computer media communication which is proposed to determine the study of problems in digital communication is used by people who use emojis in their Twitter usernames. The study uses qualitative approach which focuses on understand social phenomena and human behavior by examining meanings, pattern, and context in online interaction. The writer collected all the data from Twitter users who use emojis in their usernames.

This sociolinguistic research employs a qualitative method to investigate how emojis in Twitter usernames function as social identity markers in the NCT fan community or Nctzen as a KPOP fandom. Examining how fans use emojis in their Twitter usernames will illustrate their form of support for fandom to signify group affiliation, emotional support, and personal identity. This analysis uses the theory by Susan C. Herring (2004), Social Identity by Tajfel & Turner (1979), and Indexicality theory by Bucholtz & Hall (2005). Focused on the identity K-pop fans in digital communication.

The process of analyzing data involve several steps. First, collecting usernames consisting of emoji whose certain official account post comment using usernames on the official K-POP group NCT account. Second, checking all usernames determine they belong to stands as an NCT fans. Third, the data are analyzed by applying the three theories, such as Computer Mediated Communication by Susan C.Herring (2004) to determine how emojis function in computer-mediated communication in online interactions, Social Identity by Tajfel Turner (1979), and Indexicality theory by Bucholtz & Hall (2005). Finally, the analysis is compiled to conclude how emoji represent an interpersonal relationship connection in online environment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

GREEN LOVE HEART AS SYMBOL OF NCT OFFICIAL LOGO

This emoji is used as the identity of the NCT fans fandom community. The emoji features a green heart symbol, which is placed on profiles to identify the fanbase community and serves as NCT's signature colour. According to Susan C Herring (2004), we can see the structural meaning, is when an emoji is placed in the middle, at the beginning, and the end of a username and then used. In terms of meaning analysis, on the account, this emoji is used to inform readers that someone using it is shown as a membership identity and a symbol of love and commitment to support the group/idol. In interactional analysis, the use of the emoji in usernames is intended for online communication by fan communities to facilitate online interaction among fans in digital media. Sociality in this analysis refers to the ethics of users using these emojis and commenting on Twitter, where they post comments that support the NCT community and express their social attitudes. Referring to Bucholtz and Hall (2005), focus on The Indexicality Principle, in this interpretation, means that the use of the emoji indexes the meaning of the word. In the data found, the use of usernames *@Nomin*   implies that this account indirectly indexes the green love heart as a social identity marker for the NCT fan community. In this context, indexicality is only accurately understood by those within the community, specifically the NCT fanbase. The relationality in the analysis is on the usernames *@Nomin*   positioning himself as part of the NCT Dream group. From the perspective of Tajfel and Turner (1979), use the emoji in their Twitter usernames, this emoji helps form a sense of self-identity within the NCT fan community, meaning the account twitter usernames *@Nomin*   is claiming and showing that their identity is part of the NCT Dream fan community.

LION AS A MARK (MEMBER)

This emoji is used as a symbol for Mark, a member of NCT Dream. It is used as an identifier for Mark, who is well-known as the leader of the group. According to Susan C Herring (2004), Structurally, the usernames combine textual names with emojis, reinforcing the direct association between the emoji and Mark's identity as the leader of his group. The emoji signals that the speaker sees themselves as the protector and leader. This can help create a symbolic hierarchy of the character Mark himself. Referring to Buncholtz and Hall (2004), The indexicality principle based on the data. These usernames form an identity through an index consisting of three elements: When these emojis are used together, specifically the lion emoji , this analysis indirectly indexes something where the  emoji is not just a "lion image"—but becomes a symbol of identity and specific social meaning. From the perspective of Tajfel and Turner (1979), The use of this emoji allows them to distinguish themselves by marking themselves with a special symbol that is only understood by the internal community, meaning that fans have their own social identity when interacting on digital media.

FOX AS A RENJUN (MEMBER)

According to Susan C. Herring (2004). Structurally, we can see the structural meaning, is when an emoji is placed in the middle, at the beginning, and the end of a username and then used. *@Doyou.mm:*                         

appearance and expression that resemble a puppy. Many fans assume that the character that best suits Jen0 is a puppy. Fans also edit and create fan art depicting Jen0 with puppy ears or expressions. According to Susan C Herring (2005), a structural analysis based on data obtained from usernames that use emojis in the comments section of NCT Dream's official account *@Always baby~* 🐶🐶, *@멍멍규* 🐶🐶. On both of these accounts, their usernames are accompanied by the use of emojis placed at the end of their usernames. The meaning when through the social interaction in the use of this emoji is fans associated with the visual character of Jen0, who has narrow eyes like a puppy's face, a soft expression, and a shy character. The sociality shown in interacting with the two account usernames wants to show that they are part of the Jen0 NCT Dream fan community. According Buchholtz and Hall (2004), The Indexicality Principle, the meaning of the puppy emoji here becomes an indexical sign that indirectly refers to Jen0 in the context of the NCT Dream fandom. In the fan community, this emoji has a special meaning as a shortcut to the identity of Jen0, so that when someone sees the emoji in those usernames, they understand that the emoji represents Jen0 from NCT Dream. From the perspective of Tajfel and Turner (1979), they add emojis to their usernames as identity markers and to differentiate themselves from other community. Puppy emoji users classify their online identity as Jen0-biased fans, which is to distinguish themselves from another fandom community groups.

BEAR 🐻 AS A HAECHAN (MEMBER)

This emoji is used as the official symbol of NCT Dream member Haechan. In the NCT Dream fandom, Haechan is often nicknamed the "Haechan bear" or depicted as a bear due to his warm, playful, and cute personality. During interviews and interactions with fans, both in fan meetings and concerts, he consistently refers to his character as an attractive and cute bear. According to Susan C Herring (2004), fans use a combination of text and bear emojis in their Twitter usernames, this serves as the primary visual marker that structurally signifies a direct association with Haechan's identity and the fandom's identity. The interactional analysis reveals that users incorporating the bear emoji into their usernames send non-verbal signals to other fans, indirectly identifying themselves as *Haechan-biased*. Referring to Buchholtz and Hall (2005), the Indexicality Principle the emoji bear symbol 🐻 is formed when fans use and see the bear emoji 🐻, this bear emoji indexes the social identity that points to the identity of a person named "Haechan" within the NCT Dream fan community. From the perspective of Tajfel and Turner (1979), the social identity that users want to display can be seen from their social categorisation, namely the bear emoji 🐻, The social identification occurs when fans use the bear emoji symbol as a form of association and pride toward the idol they admire. In this analysis, the bear emoji serves as a social marker distinguishing the "in-group" from other idol fans.

BUNNY 🐰 AS A JAEMIN (MEMBER)

According to Susan C. Herring (2004), based on the data, usernames use the bunny emoji 🐰 is *@Doyou.mm:* 🐰🐰🐰, the emoji is placed at the end of the sentence signifying it as the primary identity marker that the account belongs to a fan of Jaemin. In this context, fans within the community use the bunny emoji in their usernames as an indirect marker indicating they belong to a group and support the same community. By adding this bunny emoji to their usernames, fans are indicating that their social identity lies within the fanbase of Jaemin from NCT Dream. Referring to Buchholtz and Hall (2005), focus on Indexicality Principle, The emoji 🐰 places the owners of these usernames in the position of being fans of Jaemin from NCT Dream and as an indexical sign that connects fans' online identities with Jaemin from NCT Dream. As highlighted by Tajfel and Turner (1979), When someone sees the 🐰 emoji in a username, fellow group fans will recognise that the identity being conveyed is that of a fan of Jaemin from NCT Dream.

DOLPHIN 🐬 AS A CHANLE (MEMBER)

This emoji is used as the official symbol of NCT Dream member Chanle. In the NCT Dream community, the dolphin emoji is reserved for Chanle because he has a unique singing voice. In some video content and interactions with fans, as well as during interviews, Chanle also acknowledged that he has a high-pitched voice. According to Susan C. Herring (2004), in interaction analysis This allows users of the dolphin emoji to interact non-verbally by viewing the emoji on their Twitter usernames, which signals that

“I am part of the fans of Chanle NCT Dream” and belong to the fans of Chanle NCT Dream. The sociality analysis revealed in this study is that by using the dolphin emoji as an identity of Chanle members of NCT Dream, users of these usernames demonstrate solidarity behaviour toward shared fandom and also represent social bonds among fans. Referring to Bucholtz and Hall (2005), using indexicality principle, The Indexicality sign refers to the interpretation of the emoji in usernames as an indirect or direct indexical sign associated with Chanle as an NCT Dream member and users who identify with and support Chanle.

HAMSTER 🐹 AS A JISUNG (MEMBER)

This emoji 🐹 is used as the official symbol of NCT Dream member jisung within the NCT Dream Community. Fans use the hamster emoji because they often see Jisung eating with his mouth full like a hamster. According to Susan C. Herring (2004), The meaning analysis shown in this analysis is when an emoji is shown and associated with Jisung of NCT Dream. In this context, fans within the NCT fandom perceive Jisung NCT Dream’s persona branding as having an adorable face, chubby cheeks, and a playful nature, characteristics reminiscent of a hamster 🐹. Referring to Bucholtz and Hall (2005), using The Indexicality Principle, in the principle of interpreting emoji symbols using the hamster emoji, is that the hamster emoji does not literally represent Jisung but functions as an index—a sign pointing to characteristics or associations recognised by the community. Fans associate visual similarities (chubby cheeks, cuteness, and charm) with hamsters. Thus, the hamster emoji becomes an icon that indexes Jisung’s persona within the fandom. From the perspective of Tajfel and Turner (1979), Through the use of this symbol, we can see that users form an in-group within the NCT Dream fandom community. Social identification in this analysis is that when these three users personalise their online identities as fans of Jisung from NCT Dream, this shapes their social identities when interacting on social media.

PEPPER 🌶️ AS A SYMBOL IDENTITY MARKERS FOR SONG “HOT SAUCES”

As proposed by Susan C Herring (2004) structurally, in the placement of emojis in usernames, In this case, when fans use a combination of text and emoji in their Twitter usernames, it means that they support the comeback album of that era. The use of the hot pepper emoji through social interaction, where fans send non-verbal signals to other fans to support this album, The hot pepper emoji is represented in one of NCT Dream’s most popular albums, titled “Hot Sauces”. This album tells a story of courage, the passion of youth, and someone who has grown up and dares to try new things in life. Referring to Bucholtz and Hall (2005), The 🌶️ emoji serves as an indexical marker that refers to the Hot Sauces album, which automatically connects username owners with NCT Dream. The song “Hot Sauce” describes something strong, spicy, bold, and memorable, fans use the 🌶️ emoji to index the meaning of the song with the hot pepper emoji. From the perspective of Tajfel and Turner (1986), we can see social identity Users of the 🌶️ hot pepper emoji classify their online identity as a form of support for NCT Dream’s album, specifically the song “Hot Sauces.” This indicates that when someone uses this emoji, they are indirectly connected to the NCT fan community because the emoji used to represent the song is NCT Dream.

SKATEBOARD 🛹 AS A SYMBOL IDENTITY MARKERS FOR SONG “CHILLER”

The skateboard emoji 🛹 is represented in one of NCT Dream’s most popular albums. This album tells a story of a young, free, and energetic soul in its teenage years. In addition, the music video features several skateboarding scenes throughout the music video. According to Susan C Herring (2004), fans associate the skateboard emoji with their support for NCT Dream’s song “Chiller.” The meaning conveyed is that the 🛹 emoji symbolises the main theme of the song “Chiller,” which expresses freedom, youthful energy, and a relaxed lifestyle full of skateboarder vibes. In the context of fandom, the meaning of the skateboard emoji is associated with an emotional affiliation with NCT Dream’s song Chiller. Referring to Bucholtz and Hall (2005), Referring to Bucholtz and Hall (2005), using The Indexicality principle, Emojis 🛹 are not just decorations, but index or point to specific social meanings. They connect fans with visual symbols and lifestyles associated with Chiller, such as carefree youth, adventure, and rebellion. So, when people see a username with an emoji 🛹, they immediately understand the fandom context and era. As highlighted by Tajfel and Turner (1979), we can see social identity in social categorisation, when fans use the 🛹 emoji, they categorize themselves as part of the NCT fan group. Username that use of the 🛹 hot pepper emoji classify their online identity as a form of support for NCT Dream’s album.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis revealed that the researcher has analyzed 88 data. After analysing the data, the researcher categorized which emojis were social identity markers and which emojis were only used for aesthetic purposes without indicating social identity in Twitter usernames. The study found several emojis that were used as social identity markers in digital communication interactions, there are 64 emojis used in usernames. After analysing the data, the researcher categorized which emojis were social identity markers and which emojis were only used for aesthetic purposes without indicating social identity in Twitter usernames. From the emojis, 10 emojis make emojis an identity. Green heart emoji (❤️) as the identity logo of the *NCT Dream fan community*, lion emoji (🦁) showing the identity to a specific member, namely *Mark*, fox emoji (🦊) showing the identity Renjun, puppy emoji (🐶) showing the identity to a specific member *Jeno*, rabbit emoji (🐰) showing the identity to a specific *Jaemin*, dolphin emoji (🐬) showing the identity to a specific member *Chanle*, bear emoji (🐻) showing the identity markers to specific member *Haechan*, hamster emoji (🐹) showing the identity to a specific member *Jisung*, emoji hot pepper (🌶️) identity as a supporting NCT Dream song the title *Hot Sauces* and skateboard (🛹) identity as a supporting NCT Dream song the title *Chiller*. Then, the researcher concludes that the use of emojis in Twitter usernames within the NCT Dream fan community not only serves as a symbol of fandom membership but also as part of a broader linguistic feature in digital communication.

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