

“This is 😏. It smiles, but it’s way sadder than 😞”

**The Meaning Distinctions between Pleading Face and Face Holding Back  
Tears in Taiwan**

YOU-XUAN LIN (林宥萱)

Taipei JingMei Girls High School 11th-grade

Advisor: Jung Lin (林融)

September 16, 2024

## 1. Introduction

According to Aldunate and González-Ibáñez (2017), when two people are talking, they understand each other not only through the words' meaning but also through facial expression or tone of voice. With facial expressions and tone of voice lacking in computer mediated communication (CMC), these two researchers find out that CMC users tend to use emojis to make their messages clearer. In fact, many companies value emojis. For example, Apple released a new feature "Genmoji" which can create new emojis based on a picture, description, or imagination on June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2024.

Among many emojis, one of the frequently used emojis is the Pleading Face (🥺). It is the third most frequently used emoji in Twitter in 2021 (Burge, 2013a, 2013b). Meanwhile, in 2021, an emoji with a similar look was created. This emoji is Face Holding Back Tears (😭). With such a similar look, whether there is a meaning distinction between these two emojis is unclear. Emojipedia (Burge, 2013a, 2013b) says the two emojis might share the same meaning in some context, and EmojiAll (Jingsong & YoYo, 2019a, 2019b) claims otherwise. As there are few studies focusing on the meaning distinctions between Pleading Face and Face Holding Back Tears, I would like to investigate what differentiate Pleading Face and Face Holding Back Tears. Here is my research questions:

1. Are there any meaning distinctions between Pleading Face (🥺) and Face Holding Back Tears (😭)? When are these two emojis used?
2. In the past three years, what distinctions in the meanings of PF and FHBT have arisen?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The function of Emoji

Emoji is a kind of digital graphic. It can not only convey emotions but also thoughts or concepts, and it is generally seen as an evolution of emoticons (Novak, 2015). Emoji serves several linguistic functions. Hasyim and Arafah (2019) reports four key roles: Syntactically, emojis function as elements within sentences and can be put at sentences initial, sentence final, or middle of the sentence; Pragmatically, emojis help to mitigate status differences and facilitate more equal communication; Semantically, emojis function as expressing emotions and compensate for the lack of visual cues in conveying feelings and attitudes; and Semiotically, emojis are sign that conveys meaning in above linguistic

functions. Tang and Hew (2019) point out that a number of studies have reported that emoji can be regarded as a complement to nonverbal language functions.

## 2-2 Pleading Face and Face Holding Back Tears Meanings

Pleading Face (🙏, PF) is an emoji with a pleading gaze and a frown. According to EmojiAll (Jingsong & YoYo, 2019b) and Emojipedia (Burge, 2013b), this emoji is commonly used when a user is making a request (e.g., (1a)), or is affection (e.g., (1b)). This emoji was released on June 5th, 2018.

(1)

a. 拜託各位了 🙏

I'm begging you guys 🙏

b. 到底什麼可愛小生物 🙏

What a cutie 🙏

Face Holding Back Tears (😓, FHBT) is a similar looking emoji with the same type of eyes as Pleading Face. Its eyes are watery and its mouth is trying to keep a smile. Due to its smile (i.e., positive emotion) and watery eyes (i.e., negative emotion), the meaning of Face Holding Back Tears emerges with a more diverse meaning. According to EmojiAll, and Emojipedia, FHBT can be used to express positive meanings, such as showing affection toward something (2a). However, FHBT can also be used to show resistance or to pretend to be OK when the user is actually feeling bad, such as sad (2b). This emoji was released on September 14th, 2021.

(2)

a. 感謝大家的留言 😓😓😓😓

Thanks for everyone's comments 😓😓😓😓

b. 分手真的好痛苦哇 😓

Breaking up is really painful 😓

It is noteworthy that Emojipedia states that PF and FHBT can be used interchangeably, but EmojiAll states that the usage of these two emojis are different. These websites do not provide a clear explanation of whether there is a distinction in meaning between these two emojis. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the ambiguous boundary between Pleading Face and Face Holding Back Tears.

### 3.Method

#### 3-1. Data Collection

I collected utterances containing PF and FHBT from Dcard, the third-largest domestic forum in Taiwan (Chang & Jiao, 2020). According to the official data (Dcard, 2024), nearly 80% of Dcard users are aged between 18 to 35 years old. According to Pennebaker and Stone (2003), the number of negative and positive utterances is almost equal for users aged between 8 to 39. Since most of Dcard users fall within this age range, I can collect a more complete data in Dcard. Moreover, the ratio of men to women is approximately 1:1, so I set aside gender differences.

To ensure the data was balanced, I controlled the number of utterances with target emojis for each month. I collected 81 sentences per month, approximately 1000 utterances for each year. For each month, I aimed to collect an equal number of utterances with PF and FHBT, with collecting the target emojis randomly. Moreover, to observe how FHBT and PF were used over a full year, I collected data from January 2022 to July 2024. Since FHBT was released in September 2021, I started data collection from January 2022 so that I could collect data for three years. In total, I collected 2907 random sentences.

**Table 1:** The number of PF and FHBT data from 2022 to 2024

	<b>PF</b>	<b>FHBT</b>	<b>PF+FHBT</b>
<b>2022</b>	479	476	955
<b>2023</b>	483	489	972
<b>2024</b>	437	543	980
<b>Total</b>	1401	1506	2907

#### 3-2. Data Annotation

The utterances are classified into five categories: restrain, pleading, resonating, affection, and upset based on the meanings from the two emoji definition websites (i.e., EmojiAll (Jingsong & YoYo, 2019a, 2019b), Emojipedia (Burge, 2013a, 2013b)). These five categories can be set apart based on four features: self, other, positive, and negative. Self means that the emoji is used to talk about him/herself. Other means the user is talking about the other people. Positive means the emoji is used to express positive feeling, while negative means the emoji is used to express negative feelings. The features and examples for each category are demonstrated in Table 2. One rater will label the Dcard utterances with one of the categories. If the rater has doubt on labeling, a second rater will label that utterance. If the

two labels are different from each other, the two raters will discuss till they reach consensus.

**Table 2:** The features and examples for each meaning category

	s.	o.	p.	n.	e.g.	PF	FHBT
<b>Affection</b>	+	+	+		(3)	好像是相片紙的實物 很漂亮 😞 Its texture is like a photographs' paper. This object is <u>very</u> <u>beautiful</u> 😞	做指甲被闆娘的巴哥犬 萌到 😞 🐶 I <u>was attracted</u> to the Nail salon owner's pug while I was doing nails' art 😞 🐶
<b>Resonating</b>		+	+		(4)	辛苦了 😞 服務業真的 會遇到這種客人 <u>Good work</u> 😞 There really are these types of customers in the service industry	感覺女兒睡得也不是很 開心 😞 😞 I <u>feel like</u> my daughter didn't have a particularly good nap either 😞 😞
<b>Upset</b>	+			+	(5)	這幾天詢問補習班一直 碰壁 😞 ... I've been <u>met with a</u> <u>hurdle</u> when inquiring about cram school these days 😞 ...	真的好傷心 😞 This is <u>so sad</u> 😞
<b>Restrain</b>		+		+	(6)	對 ... 我就是看不慣 😞 😞 😞 Yeah... I'm still <u>not fond</u> <u>of this</u> 😞 😞 😞	美人魚怎麼會是變醜鳴 鳴 😞 Why does the mermaid <u>look undesirable</u> (sob) 😞

<b>Pleading</b>	+	+		+	(7)	求各位好心的大大可以 給點分享 😞 😞 Can everybody <u>please</u> leave a like and follow 😞 😞	然後請多推坑我古裝 😞 ❤️ <u>Please</u> recommend me more classical pieces of clothing 😞 ❤️
-----------------	---	---	--	---	-----	---	--

Note: *S.* means *self*. *O.* means *others*. *P.* means *positive*. *N.* means *negative*. *E.g.* means *examples*.

### **i. Affection**

Affection is labeled to an utterance, when the users are expressing a positive feeling toward him/herself or toward other people. For instance, examples in (3) demonstrates the users are complimenting.

### **ii. Resonating**

Resonating is labeled to an utterance, when the users are having positive feelings towards others. For instance, the PF and FHBT examples in (4) shows that the users have compassion for other people.

### **iii. Upset**

Upset is labeled to an utterance, when a user is having negative feelings toward him/herself. For instance, the PF and FHBT examples in (5) are used to express sadness and disappointment

### **iv. Restrain**

Restrain is labeled, when the user wants to hedge the negative criticism toward other people. For example, the PF and FHBT examples are describing someone and the mermaid negatively in (6) respectively.

### **v. Pleading**

An utterance is labeled as pleading, when a user is asking him/herself or other people something. In Taiwanese culture, asking something is considered to be negative. Such as examples in (7).

## **4. Results and Analyses**

### **4-1. The Meaning Distinctions Between PF and FHBT**

The first research question is whether there is a meaning distinction between Pleading Face (PF) and Face Holding Back Tears (FHBT). Most PFs are used to convey pleading (i.e., the core meaning), while FHBT are used more in showing affection (i.e., the core meaning), upset, and restraining. Table 3 indicates that 57% of utterances with PF are expressing the meaning of pleading, which is the original meaning of this emoji (Jingsong & YoYo, 2019b). On the other hand, only 31% of utterances with FHBT (i.e., 466 utterances) are used to show affection, the core meaning of FHBT (Jingsong & YoYo, 2019a). However, up to 1077 of 1506 utterances (71%) with FHBT have a negative meaning (i.e., 299 upset, 83 restraining, 695 pleading).

A Pearson's Chi-squared test was performed to investigate the relationship between the meaning and the types of emojis (i.e., PF and FHBT). The relation between these variables was significant,  $X^2(4, N = 2907) = 58.976, p < .05$ . This result indicates that the meanings of PF and FHBT are different. The residuals of affection, resonating, upset, and pleading exceed 2, indicating that these meanings are what differentiate PF and FHBT.

**Table 3:** The total number and residuals for PF and FHBT in 2022, 2023, and 2024

	<b>PF</b>	<b>FHBT</b>
<b>Affection</b>	<b>327(-2.876)</b>	<b>466(2.770)</b>
<b>Resonating</b>	<b>59(2.213)</b>	<b>33(-2.131)</b>
<b>Upset</b>	<b>144(-2.682)</b>	<b>229(2.584)</b>
<b>Restrain</b>	65(-0.738)	83(0.710)
<b>Pleading</b>	<b>806(3.112)</b>	<b>695(-3.00)</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>1401</b>	<b>1506</b>

#### 4-2. The Meaning of PF and FHBT in 2022 to 2024

For the second research question, I would like to investigate whether the meaning of PF and FHBT are different in 2022, 2023, and 2024. As Table 4 shows, PF and FHBT differ in the function of pleading and affection in 2022 and 2023. More people use PF when they want to ask for something (i.e., pleading). More users use FHBT when expressing positive emotions (i.e., affection). But these patterns changed in 2024. Pleading became more commonly expressed through FHBT. The meanings of PF and FHBT tend to change in 2024.

A Pearson's Chi-squared test was performed to investigate the relation between the meaning and the type of emoji (i.e., PF and FHBT) in 2022. The relation between these variables was significant,  $X^2(4, N = 2907) = 27.688, p < .05$ . Moreover, the relation between

the meaning and the type of emoji in 2023 is also investigated. The relation was significant,  $X^2(4, N = 2907) = 25.31, p < .05$ . Lastly, the relation between the type of emoji and the meaning is significant in 2024,  $X^2(4, N = 2907) = 16.288, p < .05$ . This result indicates that the meaning between PF and FHBT is different.

**Table 4:** The number and residuals for PF and FHBT categories in 2022, 2023, and 2024

	2022PF	2022FHBT	2023PF	2023FHBT	2024PF	2024FHBT
<b>Affection</b>	<b>128(-2.094)</b>	<b>179(2.10)</b>	<b>105(-2.286)</b>	<b>159(2.272)</b>	92(-0.660)	129(0.592)
<b>Resonating</b>	21(1.692)	8(-1.698)	10(0.353)	8(-0.351)	28(1.771)	17(-1.589)
<b>Upset</b>	45(-1.183)	62(1.187)	56(-1.297)	78(1.289)	43(-2.118)	90(1.90)
<b>Restrain</b>	23(-0.785)	31(0.787)	19(-0.410)	23(0.407)	23(-0.039)	29(0.035)
<b>Pleading</b>	<b>262(2.130)</b>	<b>196(-2.137)</b>	<b>293(2.352)</b>	<b>221(-2.337)</b>	251(0.984)	278(-0.883)

### 4-3. General Discussion

Users like to use FHBT to express a wide variety of positive and negative meanings because the smile of FHBT is used to appeal to the negative face. Negative face means that a person wants to do something to others (i.e., making a request or giving others negative comments), but he/she does not want to be stopped and to be thought of as impolite (Brown & Levinson, 1978). For example, a lot of users use FHBT to express their upset feelings. This phenomenon is probably because users want to hedge the negative meanings they are about to give. For instance, (8) appears with a strong negative word “rude” (不友善). Without FHBT’s support, (8) might be interpreted as an expression of anger or criticism. After adding FHBT to the utterance, such as (9), the angry tone shifted to upset, and the critical meaning was mitigated.

(8)

第一次遇到這麼不友善的

I’ve never met such a rude person before

(9)

第一次遇到這麼不友善的 😞

I’ve never met such a rude person before 😞

When FHBT used to express upset, the upsetting emotion it conveyed was stronger. According to Graziano (2022), smiling and crying are often used as self-defense mechanisms, as (11) with FHBT is seems to be more upset than (10) with PF. This is because it seems like



the smile the user used in (11) was fake. He/she is pretending to be fine, but the reader knows that he/she is not fine because of the tears.

(10)

被女朋友提分手 😞

I was dumped by my girlfriend 😞

(11)

被女朋友提分手 😞

I was dumped by my girlfriend 😞

Analysis of the meanings of PF and FHBT from 2022 to 2024 reveals that FHBT's meaning has become more similar to PF's over the years, particularly in expressing the meaning of pleading. This is also because of FHBT's design. Its contradictory elements, a smiley face with a frown and tears, allow FHBT to include more complex or diverse emotions. On the other hand, PF's unitary negative elements is why its meaning remains comparatively stable between 2022 to 2024. According to Table 4, PFs are mainly used to express its core meaning.

This paper's contribution is providing evidence and analysis for how Taiwanese use FHBT and PF as the usage of emojis is influenced by both culture and language (Park et al., 2013). Compared to Western culture, Eastern culture tends to demonstrate politeness through a negative face due to its underlying principles (e.g., practicality, conservatism, and harmony).

## 5. Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that PF and FHBT are different. A significant finding is that FHBT is used to express more diverse meanings, ranging from upset to affection because of the contradictory elements (i.e., negative watery eyes and positive smile). This smile could appeal to one's negative face.

The findings in this report are subject to two limitations for future studies. First, the study did not evaluate the use of sarcasm since sarcastic data are not enough. Second, utterances should be labeled by more than just two raters, so that the result could better support how most Taiwanese interpret PF and FHBT.

## 6. References

- Aldunate, N., & González-ibáñez, R. (2016). An Integrated Review of Emoticons in Computer-Mediated Communication. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, Article 2061. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.02061>
- Burge, J. (2013). *Face Holding Back Tears* Emojipedia. <https://emojipedia.org/face-holding-back-tears>
- Burge, J. (2013). *Pleading Face* Emojipedia. <https://emojipedia.org/pleading-face>
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511813085.009>
- Chang, J. (2020). Predicting health communication patterns in follower–influencer networks: The case of Taiwan amid COVID-19. *Asian Journal for Public Opinion Research*, 8(3), 246–264. <https://doi.org/10.15206/ajpor.2020.8.3.246>
- Danesi, M. (2017). *The semiotics of emoji: The rise of visual language in the age of the internet*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Jingsong, Q., & YoYo. (2019). *Face Holding Back Tears* EmojiAll. <https://www.emojiall.com/en/emoji/%F0%9F%A5%B9>
- Jingsong, Q., & YoYo. (2019). *Pleading Face* EmojiAll. <https://www.emojiall.com/en/emoji/%F0%9F%A5%BA>
- Graziano, M. S. A. (2022). The origin of smiling, laughing, and crying: The defensive mimic theory. *Evolutionary Human Sciences*, 4, e10. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ehs.2022.5>
- Hasyim, M., & Arafah, B. (2019). Linguistic functions of emoji in social media communication. *Opción*, 35(24), 558–574. <https://produccioncientificaluz.org/index.php/opcion/article/view/30699>
- Novak, P. K., Smailović, J., Sluban, B., & Mozetič, I. (2015). Sentiment of emojis. *PLOS ONE*, 10(12), e0144296. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0144296>
- Pennebaker, J. W., & Stone, L. D. (2003). Words of wisdom: Language use over the life span. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85(2), 291–301. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.85.2.291>
- Tang, Y., & Hew, K. F. (2019). Emoticon, emoji, and sticker use in computer-mediated communication: A review of theories and research findings. *International Journal of Communication*, 13(27), 2457–2483. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/10966>
- 年輕人都關注什麼？Dcard 舉辦「Generation-D 趨勢發佈會」解密 [What is the youth pay attention to? Dcard held a Generation-D trend analysis conference]. (2024, January 26). Dcard. <https://about.dcard.tw/news/25>