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Recommended Citation

Nusrat, Farhana and Huang, Yanliu, "Less Talking, More Empathy: How to use Emojis to Help People Feel Good" (2021). *Association of Marketing Theory and Practice Proceedings 2021*. 21.
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Less Talking, More Empathy: How to use Emojis to Help People Feel Good

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ABSTRACT

Text therapy is an affordable and convenient form of counselling that allows clients to text with a Therapist. It is quite common for therapists to use emojis while talking to their clients via texts. In this study, we examine how use of emojis in the context of text therapy impacts clients' overall counselling experience. In two studies, we show that using emojis with concise messages (vs. long messages) lead to greater clients' overall satisfaction, higher willingness to pay, and increased positive word of mouth.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The use of emojis has emerged in recent years in all sorts of online communications as they are perceived to be appealing and meaningful (Rodrigues et al., 2017). Extant research has demonstrated the benefits of using emojis such as influencing consumers' affective states, increasing purchase intent, and facilitating good brand relationship (Kang et al., 2013; Li et al., 2019, Das & Hagtvedt, 2016; Hill, 2016). The current project examines the effect of using emojis in the context of "text therapy". Text therapy is a new form of counselling that allows clients to text with a therapist in an affordable and convenient way (e.g. 7 Cups, BetterHelp, Talkspace). It's quite common for the text therapists to use emojis. We investigate how the use of emojis will affect the clients' overall counselling experience and aim to provide recommendations for text therapists to better serve their clients.

We propose that using emojis in text therapy would generate positive client experience only when the use of emojis is combined with concise texts. First, we argue that a therapist who uses emojis in his/her communication with clients will be perceived as empathetic. Empathy is an integral component of counselling and employing empathy enhances the therapist-client relationships (McLeod 1999; Pope and Kline, 1999). Qiu et al. (2016) demonstrated that the use of emojis in a message led to a higher level of perceived empathy. Therefore, when therapists use emojis, clients may perceive them to be more empathetic, which will positively influence their overall counselling experience. We further argue that the benefits of using emojis in text therapy only happen when the communication message from the therapist is concise. Previous research

demonstrated that therapists' empathy and good listening skills lead to positive therapy outcomes (Elliott et al., 2004), and listening to clients' distress helps ease their pain. Therefore, clients would prefer therapists who listen more, talk less, and always put the focus on their clients. That is why we argue that when therapists use emojis with concise texts (vs. long texts), it will have a better effect on clients' counselling experience.

We have conducted two studies to test our hypotheses. In Study 1, one hundred and eleven undergraduate students (mean age = 20.8) were asked to imagine that they were talking to a therapist using a text therapy platform for the anxiety they were experiencing. We showed them a screen displaying a text conversation between them and the therapist and subsequently asked about their experience. We had three conditions with the first one demonstrating long texts from therapist, the second one using emojis along with the long texts, and the third one having emojis with concise texts. The results showed that compared to participants in the second condition, participants in the third condition were more satisfied with their counselling experience ($p < .05$), more willing to talk again with the therapist ($p < .01$), more satisfied with the counselling platform ($p < .05$), more willing to continue text therapy in the future ($p < .01$), and more likely to recommend the therapist to others ($p < .1$). These findings suggested that the use of emojis led to more positive client experience when it was combined with concise texts. The difference between the first and the second conditions was not significant, suggesting that simply adding emojis to long texts was not as effective as using emojis with concise texts.

In Study 2 (MTurk, $N = 247$, mean age 41.2), we used a similar design as in Study 1 except for adding a fourth condition that had concise texts without emojis. First, replicating study 1, participants in condition three were willing to pay more ($p < .05$), more likely to recommend the counselling platform ($p < .1$), and more likely to continue text therapy ($p < .1$) compared to participants in condition two. Similarly, participants in condition one were willing to pay more ($p < .01$), more likely to recommend the counselling platform ($p < .05$), and more likely to continue text therapy ($p < .01$) compared to participants in condition two. There was no significant difference between conditions one and three which suggested that the older population recruited through Mturk might prefer concise text messages with emojis equally as traditional long messages without emojis. Finally, participants in condition three were more willing to talk again with the therapist ($p < .05$), willing to pay more ($p < .01$), more likely to recommend the therapist ($p < .1$) and the counselling platform ($p < .1$), and perceived the therapist to be more empathetic ($p < .1$) compared to the participants in condition four. This indicated that shorter texts only did not work as effectively as shorter texts plus emojis in enhancing client experience. Also, the effects on willingness to talk again with the therapist, likeliness of recommending the therapist and the counselling platform more were mediated by the participants' perceived empathy displayed by the therapist (95% CIs did not include zero). Overall, we found that condition three has better effects than both conditions two and four, suggesting that either the use of emojis or the concise texts alone does not improve counselling experience, and only by combining both factors could we enhance client experience.

In summary, we found that effects of using emojis are not always positive. Adding emojis to long texts might even have negative impacts. However, if we combine the use of emojis with concise texts we get a positive impact. This effect might be caused by the emoji making the therapists perceived to be more empathetic. It's also possible that clients want their therapist to

be a good listener with empathy, so shorter texts with emojis give them the impression that the therapist is empathetic and willing to listen. In the future, we want to further explore both mediation and other moderating processes involved in our effects.

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